


# PERSPECTIVES ON INSTITUTIONAL CAPTURE AND THE ARTIFICIATION OF CLIMATE ACTIVISM

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## ABSTRACT

The wave of staged art vandalism by climate activist groups in 2022 confronted museums with a dilemma: in their role as guardians of objects, they must prevent such actions, but in their function as forums for social discourse, they must be receptive to climate activism entering their spaces. To navigate this challenge, some museums have adopted a strategy of “institutional capture”, incorporating activism through “artification”. This article analyzes four examples from museums in the German-speaking realm that sought to legitimize activist interventions by recasting them as art-like – an on-demand aesthetic experience of protest or performative reenactment of direct action. However, the aim of this accommodation is twofold: to pacify activism and discourage similar incidents, while primarily reasserting the museum’s institutional legitimacy at a time of increasing erosion.

## KEYWORDS

Climate activism; Institutional capture; Artification; Activist turn; Museum studies; Institutional Critique.

In October 2022, two German climate activists from the group *Letzte Generation* entered Berlin's Natural History Museum and glued themselves to the scaffolding of a dinosaur skeleton in an act of peaceful protest. A year later, the traces left behind by this direct action became an exhibit in their own right. Two large green circles now mark the adhesive residue on the scaffolding, in which the imprints of the activist's fingers can still be recognized. The accompanying text emphasizes: "Although we do not condone property damage, we want to preserve the traces of this action." The recognition of the direct action's merit and its simultaneous condemnation reveals the dilemma museums found themselves in when suddenly confronted with the surge of staged attacks on artworks and historical artifacts.

The first attack on the *Mona Lisa* in May 2022, with what appeared to be a buttercream cake, was followed by thirty-eight similar actions in the same year and only a few more in the subsequent two years – including another attack on Da Vinci's *Gioconda*, involving soup as the weapon of choice.<sup>1</sup> By throwing liquid foods at artworks, gluing themselves to museum walls, and filming these actions for online dissemination, climate activists developed a new distinct protest aesthetic that triggered emotional responses in the public: fury, skepticism, approval. The protests forced the institutions to weigh up their conserving function as custodians of cultural artifacts against their role as public forums for addressing contemporary issues, such as the climate crisis. According to these two seemingly conflicting roles, art museums reacted in two ways.

The first was repression: bag bans were imposed and significantly more security personnel was hired. This strategy of preventing climate protests in museums has been supplemented at the legal level of state prosecution as a deterrent from further action. The two young activists who staged the most well-known protest action – hurling Heinz's tomato soup on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888) at the National Gallery in London – were sentenced to twenty months and two years in prison. In response to a similar incident in June 2024, where a *Riposte Alimentaire* activist defaced a Claude Monet painting, the French Minister of Culture announced that she would work with the Ministry of Justice "to develop a penal policy for this new form of crime that attacks the noblest aspect of our cohesion: culture!"<sup>2</sup> This authoritarian rhetoric of law and order also prevails in Italy or the US, where two activists were sentenced to one year

<sup>1</sup> Nives Dolsak, *Museum-Related Climate Activism 2022*, in: *Harvard Dataverse*, 2023 (January 31, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Garreth Harris, "It Must Stop!". French Culture Minister Pursuing New Law to Deter Art Activists, in: *The Art Newspaper*, June 4, 2024 (January 23, 2025).

in prison for pouring red powder on a museum display case holding the US Constitution.<sup>3</sup>

However, the museums' second type of response aimed to achieve the same outcome – pacifying the protest – but takes a very different approach. I call it “institutional capture”. This term describes strategies to transform climate protests in a way that neutralizes their impact on the museum, redirecting them towards the institution's objectives and diminishing their effectiveness: defanging the protest. The capture of the activism is aided by a blurring of categories. Art historian Wolfgang Ullrich notes that “for some years now, art activism, in particular, has been defining the aesthetic-formal standards of political protest in public space”. As a result,

every action is perceived as an art action, which is why it is not only quickly reduced to a rebellious anti-gesture, but above all understood as something almost like a work of art, in which every single element can withstand a thorough interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

The very notion that such acts could be considered art, and therefore subject to aesthetic critique, reflects a broader tendency within the art world to frame various forms of protest through an artistic lens. This is particularly true for climate activism of recent years.

The influential art critic Jerry Saltz, for instance, was unconvinced by the protests. Not because he took offense at the art vandalism, but because the message of this “kind of performance art” was “muddled and unconvincing”.<sup>5</sup> In other words: bad art! Still, Saltz went on to say that he “wouldn't be surprised to see Plummer and Holland's protest [the staged vandalization of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*] included in upcoming lists of top-ten artworks 2022”. And, indeed, Saltz's prediction was quickly validated when the German art magazine *Monopol* placed the climate activists on its “Top 100 Most Important People in the Art World 2022” list.<sup>6</sup> While skepticism about the protests' effectiveness persisted in the art world, others expressed solidarity with the activists, particularly as the

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Elena Goukassian, Climate Activists Who Dumped Red Powder on US Constitution at National Archives Sentenced to Prison, in: *The Art Newspaper*, November 22, 2024 (January 22, 2025).

4

Wolfgang Ullrich, Die Auftritte der Letzten Generation aus kunsthistorischer Sicht. Performance oder doch bitterer Ernst?, in: *Tagesspiegel*, March 6, 2023 (February 2, 2025). Translation of this citation and all the following citations by the author.

5

Jerry Saltz, Mashed Potatoes Meet Monet. Climate Activists Have Been Celebrated for Defacing Great Paintings. Why?, in: *New York Magazine*, December 6, 2022 (January 23, 2025).

6

Monopol Top 100. Das sind die wichtigsten Persönlichkeiten der Kunstwelt, in: *Monopol*, November 21, 2022 (February 1, 2025).



first convictions were handed down. Some artists identified with the activists on both a personal and an artistic level, seeing their actions as part of a broader tradition of politically charged performance art. Pussy Riot member Nadya Tolokonnikova, for instance, publicly called for the release of the two young protesters who threw soup at *Sunflowers*. Writing an opinion piece for *The Guardian* and posting on Instagram, she recalled her own experience: “I was 22 once and also received a two-year sentence for an artistic, non-violent action.”<sup>7</sup> Art historical discussions on climate activism in museums have also emerged. They have sought to contextualize such actions within a history of iconoclasm and its connections to other art forms, such as Action Painting,<sup>8</sup> or analyze the protests themselves through an art historical lens.<sup>9</sup>

The integration of activism into the art sphere not only transforms activism itself at its ontological level but also reshapes the museum as an institution. Over the past decade, curators have increasingly engaged with activist movements, recognizing that protesters intentionally select museums as sites of demonstration, while also viewing their own curatorial practice as a form of activism. It is within this dynamic that Pinar Durgun, who works at the Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin, poses the following question:

Here is a thought for museums: Would people be protesting to raise awareness of climate change in a museum that treats climate change as a serious matter and hosts an exhibit on climate change?<sup>10</sup>

This text sets out to examine instances where museums have taken up this challenge, exploring what happens to both activism and the museum when such inclusion occurs and under what circumstances institutions open their doors voluntarily to climate activist groups.

Philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt examined how Western capitalist states responded to the rising protests and social movements of the late 1960s. They identified two distinct approaches: the repressive kind and the effort to “change the composition” of the protesting masses, “integrating, dominating, and

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Nadya Tolokonnikova, Van Gogh Is Turning in His Grave at the Harsh Just Stop Oil Sentence. I Know, because I Spoke to Him, in: *The Guardian*, October 3, 2024 (February 2, 2025).

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See for instance Kerstin Schankweiler, Die Letzte Generation im Museum, in: *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 37/4, 2024, 324–334.

9

See for instance Anne Bessette and Juliette Bessette, On Environmental Activism in Museums, in: *e-flux*, December 6, 2022 (February 2, 2025).

10

Pinar Durgun, Is Protest Really the Problem in Museums? (Imagine) Museums as Places of Dialogue, Collaboration, and Disruption, in: *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 12, 2023, 21–24.

profiting from its new practices and forms”.<sup>11</sup> These approaches form two sides of the same coin. In the German-speaking realm, as opposed to most other European countries, the repressive approach is complemented by the process of institutional capture. I argue that the museum’s use of appropriation of climate activism is a pacifying strategy stemming from its declining authority and increasing reliance on external socio-political forces. Critical discourses can be inverted to ultimately (also) benefit the institution, a tactic seen in the institutionalization of Institutional Critique. The crucial difference, however, is that climate activism is not an artistic practice, and that activists do not consider themselves as artists. How is activism then turned into something art-like? I will examine four case studies that offer different perspectives on institutional capture through an “artification” of the activism and offering insight into the roles of both the traditional notion of a museum and the operations of contemporary art museums.

## I. Fatal Historicization. From Reality to the Museum

After having put the climate activists’ fingerprints on display, the director of the Museum of Natural History described them as a “contemporary document of the climate crisis”.<sup>12</sup> Despite the immediacy of the protest and the ongoing actions by climate activists, the museum’s framing transforms their traces into historical documents from a bygone era. The museum’s archiving logic, which facilitates the shift from the immediacy of protest to its instant historicization, is grounded in its relationship to “real” history, “reality”, or, as art theorist Boris Groys occasionally also refers to it, the “realm of the profane”.<sup>13</sup> This relation, according to him, is neither defined by the museum being secondary to “real” history nor by it merely documenting or reflecting it.<sup>14</sup> Instead, reality itself becomes secondary to the museum, as the real can only be understood in comparison to the museum’s collection. Depending on what the museum chooses to collect, archive, and exhibit, our perception of reality shifts. Or, as Groys puts it, “reality can be defined in this context as the sum of all things not yet collected”.<sup>15</sup>

When an object from the “real” world enters the museum space – subjected to its system of collecting and archiving – it crosses the

<sup>11</sup>

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2000, 268.

<sup>12</sup>

Johannes Vogel cited in Sarah Dapena Fernandez, Letzte Generation. Handabdrücke werden jetzt in Museum ausgestellt – “Zeitdokument der Klimakrise”, in: *Berlin Live*, October 6, 2023 (February 1, 2025).

<sup>13</sup>

Boris Groys, *Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, Munich 1992.

<sup>14</sup>

Id., On the New, in: *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 38, 2000, 5–17, here 6.

<sup>15</sup>

Ibid.

boundary between mere, profane existence and valorized culture. It is reinterpreted, reassessed, and modified; in short, its ontological status is transformed. This transformation, brought about by the museum, is the central focus of this article. How can this change be identified in the context of climate activism, and through what specific museum practices does it occur?

In the museum, a different sense of time prevails. It is characterized by a simulated durability – a sense of permanence reinforced by the conservation of objects, technical interventions that grant collected artifacts a kind of artificial longevity, which translates to the stable context of the universal museum. Alexander Araya López and Colin J. Davis, in their recent text on climate activism in museums, identify this sense of longevity as one reason individuals visit museums or acknowledge renowned masterpieces, as it “reinforce[s] their pursuit of significance and engage[s] in cultural worldview validation, fostering a sense of security against mortality anxiety”.<sup>16</sup> It is arguably precisely this simulated sense of security and permanence that drives climate activists into museums – to challenge and destabilize it in the face of acute climate crisis. This may explain why, in October 2022, the two activists chose a dinosaur skeleton for their protest: a species that went extinct millions of years ago on this very planet, yet whose remains are artificially preserved in natural history museums around the world.

However, the sense of permanence prevalent in the museum does not mean, by implication, that the objects it cares for and exhibits, collects, and preserves, are thought to be *alive* forever. On the contrary, Groys contends that museums demonstrate the elements of the past as “incurably dead”.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to cemeteries – sometimes invoked as an analogy to the conservationist function of Western museums – which conceal the dead to create a space of mystery and potential resurrection, museums display artifacts, rendering them static objects of contemplation. They are places “of definitive death that allows no resurrection, no return of the past” despite keeping the objects miraculously intact on a material level.<sup>18</sup>

The musealization of the Letzte Generation’s efforts then undermines the movement’s core objective: to persistently emphasize the urgency of fighting climate change *before* it is too late. The conventional function of Western museums, acting as preservers that cast a shroud of historicity and pastness over their collections, appears incompatible with the goals of climate activism. This museal approach borders on cynicism – albeit unintentional – as it evokes an image of a future where Earth has perished, yet museums

<sup>16</sup>

Alexander Araya López and Colin J. Davis, On Art and the Limits of Dissent. Climate Activism at Museums and Galleries, in: *Protest* 4/2, 2024, 143–176, here 9 (February 28, 2025).

<sup>17</sup>

Boris Groys, On Art Activism, in: *e-flux* 56, 2014 (February 1, 2025).

<sup>18</sup>

Ibid.

eternally safeguard the remnants of efforts to still save that very planet, preserved for an audience that is no longer there to see and contemplate.

## II. The Visual Earmarks of the Museum World

The Museum of Natural History's approach to managing the protest that took place in its spaces relied on traditional museological tools. The example underscores how institutional capture operates, at first, mostly at a perceptual level, using curatorial strategies to pacify the visual impact of protest, making climate activism appear congruent with the expectations of museum audiences. In a second case, this approach, which relies on the traditional tools available to the museum, becomes even more apparent. On October 30, 2022, a protester threw fake blood on Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's painting *The Clown* (1886/1887) at the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, which was then taken down for restoration.<sup>19</sup> However, the artificial blood splatters on the textile wallpaper could not be easily removed and remained prominently visible. Presumably in response to this conspicuous circumstance in the Impressionist room, the stains were contextualized with a small sign. It referred to the incident, explaining the origin of the stains and the absence of the painting. For a few weeks, this was how visitors found the Impressionist room, leading many to consider the stains as being "on display" and photographing the scene. The museum itself commissioned a photographer to document the extraordinary state of the room. In his pictures, he staged a Rodin statue in front of the bloodstains. The photographs then served as illustrations for an article in the museum's own online publication about the restoration of the painting [Fig. 1].<sup>20</sup>

In this instance, while I do not claim that the iconoclastic gesture has been intentionally presented as art, the earmarks of the world of the museum reveal themselves. In this world, first and foremost, it is specific visual and conceptual codes that govern how something is exhibited to ensure that it is understood as on display by visitors. Consequently, the alteration of the relationship between object and audience on a visual and spatial level implies a change in the ontological status of what is displayed. This, of course, brings to mind the old joke that modern art, such as ready-mades, is indistinguishable from everyday objects to the "untrained eye" of visitors who thus end up taking photos of a fire extinguisher. In this case, however, it remains unclear whether the stains more closely resemble a fire extinguisher or the remains of a contemporary art performance, as the museum's response remains ambiguous. The Alte Nationalgalerie itself seems uncertain about how to position

<sup>19</sup>

The woman was eventually not identified as a climate activist, however, she employed the same tactics to protest for "more democracy", the police stated.

<sup>20</sup>

Kevin Hanschke, Die Bild-Rahmen-Einheit. Verglasung ist kein Vollschutz, in: *SPK Magazin*, December 14, 2022 (January 25, 2025).



[Fig. 1]

Exhibition view of the Impressionist room at the Alte Nationalgalerie Berlin, 2022 © SPK, Photothek. Photo: Thomas Imo.

itself vis-à-vis this incident. Nevertheless, the case illustrates both the ambivalence and the power inherent in the museum space, generating valences between the mere thing and the cultural object that are not easily navigated by either the institution or its visitors.

### III. The Ready-Made Museum Practice

As the first two examples have demonstrated, the museum can bring about a transformation in an object without altering the visual appearance of it. The ready-made serves as a prime example of this. Though it appears to be just an ordinary object from the realm of the real, the profane, it is largely the museum's context that allows it to be recognized as a work of art. Boris Groys terms this subtle shift "difference beyond difference", defining it as the hallmark of true novelty – an object that appears indistinguishable from others yet is fundamentally different. As he puts it, "the museum also functions as a place where difference beyond difference, between artwork and mere thing, can be produced or staged".<sup>21</sup> While the museum has always fulfilled this role, its authority in distinguishing and redefining value boundaries has become even more essential since Duchamp and the subsequent evolution of art.

However, the museum – or rather, the very idea of it – has since undergone significant change. The universal museum, once tied to grand master narratives and singular truths, has long been dismantled along with the stability of its context, collection, and authority. The contemporary art museum has transformed into a kind of theater, incorporating rotating exhibitions, loans, private collections, biennials, festivals, parties, fashion shows, augmented by catalogues and discursive programs – and as the next case illustrates – interventions.

The Viennese Leopold Museum went a step further in its reaction to the staged vandalization of its Gustav Klimt painting *Death and Life* (1910/1915) by two activists of the Letzte Generation Österreich, who doused it with black, oil-like paint. Instead of integrating the protest gesture into the museum's exhibition environment, the museum responded with a self-produced protest gesture. For the intervention *A Few Degrees More (Will Turn the World into an Uncomfortable Place)* in 2023, fifteen paintings of the collection permanently on display were slightly tilted – a reference to the degree of global warming [Fig. 2 and Fig. 3].<sup>22</sup> *A Few Degrees More* can be understood as an attempt to fit the protest gesture into the environment of a museum by having the gesture mimicked by the institution.

<sup>21</sup>

Groys, *On the New*, 8.

<sup>22</sup>

The intervention was a cooperation of the Leopold Museum with CCCA (Climate Change Centre Austria) and was developed by the Austrian creative agency Wien Nord Service-plan.





[Fig. 2]

Exhibition view of the intervention *A Few Degrees More (Will Turn the World into an Uncomfortable Place)*, at the Leopold Museum, Vienna, March 22 – June 26, 2023 © Leopold Museum, Wien. Photo: Andreas Jakwerth.



[Fig. 3]

Exhibition view of the intervention *A Few Degrees More (Will Turn the World into an Uncomfortable Place)* at the Leopold Museum, Vienna, March 22 – June 26, 2023 © Leopold Museum, Wien. Photo: Andreas Jakwerth.



The Leopold Museum shifted the authorship of the protest to itself. This approach corresponds with the more recent shift in museums' self-image as platforms and public forums offering a space for socio-political discourse. Nevertheless, many museums continue to claim a hegemonic position of control. Director of the Leopold Museum, Hans-Peter Wipplinger, firmly believes in the museum's primary role as a space that shares a unique, interdependent connection with "the world": "Art museums [...] regard themselves as spaces of inspiration and reflection about our being and thus have the potential to positively impact our future actions by making societal phenomena more visible", he stated in a press release.<sup>23</sup>

The contrast between the two conceptions of the art museum – one rooted in tradition, the other reflecting contemporary approaches – becomes evident here, along with the tension between them. The historical understanding of the museum that Wipplinger seems to evoke is not only that of a counterpoint to society, which can also be interpreted as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a space of difference, but at times even as the embodiment of transcendence. On the other hand, it is now generally accepted that the museum must be lifted out of this privileged position, must engage critically with its inherent connections to historical and contemporary injustices, and must recognize and fulfill its social and public function. Rather than the authoritative civilizing and educational mandates of the museum, it now prioritizes the individual visitor and their experiential journey.<sup>24</sup> With state funding becoming increasingly scarce, museums are under growing pressure to improve their effectiveness, expand their reach, and segment visitors into categories for tailored services and assessment.<sup>25</sup> "Every large exhibition or installation [...] is made with the intention of designing a new order of historical memories, of proposing a new criteria for collecting by reconstructing history", Groys writes accordingly.<sup>26</sup> "These traveling exhibitions and installations are temporal museums which openly display their temporality."<sup>27</sup> This change is evident not only in the museum's social responsibilities and audience engagement but also in how it navigates and presents notions of time and difference.

<sup>23</sup>

A Few Degrees More (Will Turn the World into an Uncomfortable Place), [Leopold Museum Press Statement](#), March 22, 2023 (February 1, 2025).

<sup>24</sup>

Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, Chichester 2011, 6.

<sup>25</sup>

Rina Kundu and Nadine M. Kalin, Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum, in: [Studies in Art Education](#) 57/1, 2015, 39–52 (February 28, 2025).

<sup>26</sup>

Groys, *On the New*, 15.

<sup>27</sup>

*Ibid.*

The contemporary museum is no longer merely a space where “difference beyond difference” is produced and staged; it also curates multiple tailored versions of this difference. Unlike the historical notion of permanence and uniqueness, these versions openly embrace their temporal limitations and polyphony, making them adaptable and flexible. This transience, combined with diverse presentation methods, enables museums to showcase multiple perspectives simultaneously. While the art museum has traditionally been able to craft a world that exists apart from what was considered *real* life, its contemporary version has the tools to construct what I call “ready-made worlds”.

By this, I also draw on philosopher and psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik’s concept of a “ready-made territory”, which illustrates the distinction between the capitalist appropriation of non-capitalist territories or forms of resistance, and cultural practices of incorporation, such as those propagated in the Brazilian Anthropophagic Movement. In the 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago*, poet Oswald de Andrade argued that Brazil’s history of “cannibalizing” other cultures serves as a way of asserting its identity in resistance to European postcolonial cultural domination.<sup>28</sup> The criterion for whether a culture was allowed to participate in the “anthropophagic banquet” was, according to Rolnik, whether and to what extent it was able to provide the receiving system with the means “to create new worlds based on the current demands of life”.<sup>29</sup> Instead of denying or merely imitating the colonizers’ cultures in artistic production, anthropophagy sought to devour and deconstruct them – unraveling and transforming these very cultures while allowing the receiving culture itself to be unsettled and reshaped by them, ultimately giving rise to new hybrids. This process was even interpreted as a form of self-transcendence, with cannibalism seen as a symbolic, empowering mechanism of other-becoming.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, capitalist appropriation first of all very seldomly acts from a subaltern position. While it can be a strategy of self-preservation in times of crisis, it typically seeks to primarily change what it incorporates by necessarily changing itself during the process, often through imitation. This is evident in practices like “pink-washing” or “green-washing”, where corporations rebrand to appear socially and politically progressive or environmentally friendly without implementing substantive changes to support these claims. Rolnik argues that the difference between these two modes of capture lies in the capitalist strategy of creating enclosed, delimited territories to contain newly appropriated elements, thereby

<sup>28</sup>

Oswald de Andrade, *Manifesto Antropófago*, in: *Revista de Antropofagia*, 1928, 3.

<sup>29</sup>

Suely Rolnik, *Zombie Anthropophagie. Zur neoliberalen Subjektivität*, Vienna 2018, 15.

<sup>30</sup>

See for instance Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy’s Point of View. Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, Chicago/London 1992.

neutralizing their transformative potential while preserving the illusion of innovation. The spaces that arise after the shock of cultural or systemic appropriation within a capitalist system are always predefined, which is why Rolnik describes them as “ready-made territories”.

I contend that while the museum creates possible worlds, they are predefined from the start. They only offer curated glimpses of uncharted territories, new paradigms, or speculative futures while inherently constraining these visions within predetermined institutional boundaries, where meanings, narratives, ideologies, values, hierarchies, and possibilities for action are prescribed. This does not necessarily mean that museums are acting within a strictly capitalist logic; rather, this reflects a broader hegemonic mode of operation, in which cultural frameworks and the power they carry shape the ways in which difference is presented, absorbed, and contained. What I refer to as “ready-made worlds” not only encompass the museum’s power to define the boundaries between what is considered real and profane and what is deemed art, but also involve the creation of culturally, philosophically, phenomenologically and hermeneutically pre-constructed, carefully curated environments tailored to specific groups simultaneously.

One could also think of these museum-fabricated worlds as a world of a video game: pre-crafted, with a specific history, populated with characters, and, most importantly, governed by consistent, inherent rules. They are detailed and coherent backdrops, providing a foundation for users to play in, to move around, explore, and create their own stories. In the museum, this allows the enhancement of the visitor’s experience of movement and immersion, offering diverse narratives and perspectives within only one set physical space. Rather than merely assigning value, the museum has evolved into a space that adapts quickly to societal shifts, such as climate change and the activism around it, curating multiple flexible worlds that reflect and respond to such movements.

For *A Few Degrees More*, the Leopold Museum built a ready-made world around the activist action. Rather than disturbing, disrupting, or counteracting the world of the museum, as the activists’ actions did, the museum’s intervention was conceived and designed to perfectly fit into it. The transformation of black paint on a Klimt painting into the tilting of a Klimt painting is comparable on a visual level as both contradict the conventional earmarks of art presentation as described in the first two cases. The Leopold Museum, however, opted for an alternative, much tamer aesthetic in which the violent, iconoclastic aspect of colorful foods on the objects were replaced by their repositioning in space, preserving the paintings’ integrity. Furthermore, the framing of this change in visual codes aligns with its promotional language. The interpretation is consistent with the established context: the art museum is an important space for alternative, exploratory and creative thinking where real-world problems can be contemplated and world-changing thought and action initiated.

Fitting the protest into its own ready-made world, the museum can underscore the updated metanarrative of itself as an institution in tangible service of society. The art museum becomes the better activist. After the attack on the Klimt painting, Wipplinger had announced that the museum was in solidarity but that “attacks on works of art are definitely the wrong way to go”.<sup>31</sup> The museum’s own intervention, in contrast, is supposed “to proactively make a constructive contribution in the hope that other museums and galleries will join this movement by gently turning their art and cultural treasures into climate ambassadors”<sup>32</sup> – the intervention becomes a “positive climate action”.<sup>33</sup> Wipplinger suggests that the meaning and significance of the actions are entirely different. While one is productive and positive, the other is destructive and negative. The museum claims for itself the more authentic enactment of these world-improving ideas and actions, which the climate activists carried out only crudely and deficiently. Yet one can speculate as to whether the museum would have installed the “positive climate protest” at all if the climate activists had not staged the protest in the Leopold Museum in the first place. In the case of *A Few Degrees More*, the museum did not generate activism but transformed it into a ready-made museum practice.

#### IV. Value Capture and Value Coding

In 2022, ICOM (International Council of Museums) updated its definition of a museum to do justice to the shifting image of the institution. Accordingly, a museum today is a

permanent institution in the service of society [...]. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.<sup>34</sup>

Notably, this definition encompasses the inherent tension between notions of time and difference within the institution, which serves as the foundation for my concept of the museum as a set territory presenting a range of ready-made worlds, as it is considered a *permanent* institution while simultaneously offering *varied experiences*.

<sup>31</sup>  
Hans-Peter Wipplinger cited in Leopold-Museum hängt als “positive” Klimaaktion Bilder schief, in: *Der Standard*, March 21, 2023 (February 2, 2025).

<sup>32</sup>  
Leopold-Museum hängt als “positive” Klimaaktion Bilder schief.

<sup>33</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>  
ICOM Approves a New Museum Definition, *ICOM*, August 24, 2022 (January 28, 2025).

In the next case study, however, I would like to focus on the aspect of the contemporary museum mentioned in the definition – one that is described as inclusive and participatory, engaging with different communities. In November 2022, amid the wave of staged art vandalism by climate activists, ICOM Germany issued a statement, co-signed by ninety-two museum directors worldwide, which did not explicitly condemn the activists' actions but stressed that they “severely underestimate the fragility of these irreplaceable objects”.<sup>35</sup> The signatories, as “museum directors entrusted with the care of these works”, expressed being “deeply shaken by their risky endangerment”.<sup>36</sup> However, just six months later, ICOM Germany took a different stance, inviting the climate activist group Letzte Generation to stage a performance on International Museum Day, May 21, 2023, at eight major museums across the country.

Letzte Generation and its other national branches are, of course, responsible for most of the staged attacks on artworks across Europe. Alongside the black paint splashed on the Klimt painting at the Leopold Museum, members of the group also threw mashed potatoes onto a Monet painting in Potsdam, glued themselves to iconic works such as Rafael's *Sistine Madonna* (1512/23) in Dresden, the *Laocoön* group (200 BC to the 70s AD) at the Vatican, and a Goya painting at the Prado Museum in Madrid.

Accepting the invitation, the activists staged an art performance – a four-hour “permanent reading” – in the lobbies of, among others, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig, and the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. Only two months earlier, in March 2023, activists of the group had tried to paste over the security glass of Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) with an altered image but were stopped by security guards of the Kunsthalle Hamburg [Fig. 4]. On May 21, however, there were a few chairs, a small podium, and a microphone in the lobby of the Kunsthalle [Fig. 5]. Additionally, some museums displayed a video installation that summarized the media's response to the climate actions by Letzte Generation in museums, aiming to provoke discussion.<sup>37</sup>

Between the attempt to stage the vandalization of an artwork at the Hamburger Kunsthalle and a reading performance in its lobby lies, first and foremost, what I have previously only hinted at but, in this case, is explicitly affirmed. The museum's ability to stage or produce the distinction between an artwork and a “mere thing” is fully realized here, as Letzte Generation is not protesting but rather invited to *perform protest*. Beyond this ontological shift, the

<sup>35</sup>

Statement: Attacks on Artworks in Museums, ICOM, February 19, 2024 (January 28, 2025).

<sup>36</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>

See Angelika Schoder, Konstruktiver Klima-Protest. Museen kooperieren mit der Letzten Generation, in: *musermeku*, May 23, 2023 (February 20, 2025).



[Fig. 4]

Photograph of activists from the group Letzte Generation during their protest action at Kunsthalle Hamburg, on March 19, 2023 © Letzte Generation.



[Fig. 5]

Photograph of activists from the group Letzte Generation during their reading performance at Hamburger Kunsthalle, on May 21, 2023 © Letzte Generation.



group's two actions within the space of the Hamburger Kunsthalle differ through the process of what philosopher C. Thi Nguyen calls "value capture". His notion describes how social and institutional structures can reshape an individual's motivations by offering simplified, often quantified versions of complex values. This process is exemplified by social media platforms like Twitter (now X) where the gamified environment gradually shifts users' focus from genuine communication to pursuit of measurable metrics, aligning behavior with the platform's reward system rather than users' original intentions.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the International Museum Day, there was no gamified scoring or point system. But there is a game that is played, and it has rules. When a museum employee of the Hamburger Kunsthalle was asked if she was afraid of mashed potato on the day of the performance, she replied: "No, I think that's an unspoken law for today."<sup>39</sup> The art institution, long subject to scholarly analysis of its ritualized norms,<sup>40</sup> unilaterally sets the terms for activist engagement through its subtle governance of its own spaces. By inviting protesters, museums implicitly establish boundaries, chief among them the rather obvious expectation to refrain from staged artwork destruction. This tacit agreement between museums and activists was presumably intended to extend beyond the event, a hope that has so far been fulfilled for German museums.

According to art educator Nora Sternfeld, if an invitation were a matter of a "change of perspective that makes a difference", it would be aimed at "the entire rules of the game and not merely the possibility of playing along".<sup>41</sup> And, of course, there is much more to the rules of the game than not to attack artworks. In this context, museums subtly reassert their authority by channeling activist energy into sanctioned forms of expression, effectively domesticating dissent within the confines of institutional decorum and pre-existing hierarchical structures. One may speculate whether the museum would really have accepted just *any* performance by the activists, or if a reading seemed to be the least objectionable option.

A four-hour reading performance on a makeshift podium in the museum lobby operates on a much lower level of affect and with practically no visual impact. The activists' original motivation – drawing attention to the climate crisis, conveying their feelings of existential fear, and expressing concern for both human and non-human life on Earth – seems to have been transformed into a desire to be taken seriously as interlocutors, rather than "misunderstood

<sup>38</sup>

C. Thi Nguyen, *Games. Agency as Art*, Oxford 2020, 201.

<sup>39</sup>

Jens Büchsenmann, Lesen statt kleben. 'Letzte Generation' kooperiert mit Museen, in: *NDR Kultur*, May 22, 2023 (January 28, 2025).

<sup>40</sup>

See for instance Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, London 1995.

<sup>41</sup>

Nora Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, Berlin 2018, 76.



as terrorists”, as one activist explained.<sup>42</sup> The scale and scope of the action have been greatly reduced. The audience for the reading performance is limited to museum visitors, whereas the original protests were primarily aimed at a secondary, digital audience, as Kerstin Schankweiler points out. She details the protest at the Barberini Museum in Potsdam, where two activists threw mashed potato at a Monet painting, knelt in front of it, and one began a prepared monologue. While museum visitors immediately expressed their indignation, the activist continued without interruption, as her rhetorically framed questions were not intended to spark dialogue with the audience in the room, but rather to engage a much broader audience beyond the museum in the digital realm [Fig. 6]. Viewers of the video were meant to undergo what Schankweiler describes as “affective media witnessing”, in which they “become witnesses to the affects, following the iconoclastic act up close, as if they were there themselves”.<sup>43</sup> These protest actions of staged art vandalism are strategically designed to leverage the attention economy driven by digital platforms, producing powerful visuals while stirring intense emotions (whether positive or negative) in video viewers. This original approach, aimed at the digital space and shaped by its platform-capitalist, media-spectacle-oriented nature, was inverted in the reading performance by the museum.

By imposing an institutional framework, the activism was quantified, making it consumable within the museum’s ritualized behavioral context. Its original impact and intent had been altered: instead of an unannounced disruptive action, the activism was integrated into the normative idea of something exhibitable that visitors could come by and *look at*. Climate activists thus changed from outsiders to insiders, from rioters to invitees, from vandals to performers. This sort of value capture successfully transforms activism’s emotional resonance, making it controllable and consumable within the museum’s ready-made world.

## V. Politics of Deference

Another case where a museum opted to invite climate activist groups into its own space – getting ahead of them before they could invade it – is constituted by the exhibition “#noclimartchange”. “While other museums currently want to keep climate protection groups out for fear of attacks”, according to the German art magazine *Monopol* in its description of the exhibition, the “Tyrolean Ferdinandeum voluntarily brings them into its own rooms”.<sup>44</sup> It was the

<sup>42</sup> Irma Trommer of the Letzte Generation said: “The hope is that people will get to know us and see: Hey, this has nothing to do with terrorism.” In: Büchsenmann, Lesen statt kleben.

<sup>43</sup> Schankweiler, Die Letzte Generation im Museum, 330.

<sup>44</sup> Alia Lübben, Etwas abzusperren, ist mir innerlich zuwider, in: *Monopol*, December 19, 2022 (February 28, 2025).



[Fig. 6]

Photograph of activists from the group Letzte Generation during their protest action at the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, on October 13, 2022 © Letzte Generation. See Jan von Brevern and Anna Degler, Editorial. Distanz. Ein Annäherungsversuch, in: *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 4/3, 2023, 349–360, here 350 (April 15, 2025).

museum's head of marketing communications who developed the exhibition concept, based on the credo: "We don't exclude anyone, we include them."<sup>45</sup> For five months, the museum offered a room to four climate activist groups, among them Letzte Generation. The exhibition included a mural of a street blockade with a chair for visitors to sit on, a photograph smeared with red paint and numerous posters and banners from climate demonstrations that became part of the museum's collection after the exhibition ended [Fig. 7 and Fig. 8]. The room that was given to the climate groups was located between the cloakroom and the entrance to the regular exhibition space. What the Ferdinandeum offered was a literal in-between space.

An "in-between space" is how Nora Sternfeld describes the museum itself: "between what they refer to and what can happen in them and with them".<sup>46</sup> The in-between space presupposes the operation of institutional capture. It is within the difference between the space the museum seems to offer – infinite and vast – and what it actually offers – a confined and regulated territory – where institutional capture takes place. The room that presupposes capture is also the main concern of philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's book *Elite Capture*.<sup>47</sup> Táíwò understands a "room" both metaphorically, as a social place in society, a class, that can be entered through the accumulation or inheritance of economic, cultural and symbolic capital, as well as literally, like the classroom, or the courtroom. Both understandings are necessarily linked. Táíwò argues that unequal societies are structured through many different rooms which become progressively more inaccessible as one ascends the social and economic hierarchy. To change such a societal structure, "we have to challenge how those rooms are put together, the security system that controls access to them, and the rules that dictate what happens in them", he asserts.<sup>48</sup> To show that the art museum is not only an elitist institution but lives up to the shift in its identity as an inclusive platform facilitating discourse on social change, marginalized groups or individuals supposedly representing such a group are increasingly invited into it. Táíwò calls this symbolic invitation the "politics of deference". Politics of deference, he argues, locate "attentional injustice in the selection of spokespeople" to represent

<sup>45</sup>  
Michael Klieber, #NOCLIMARTCHANGE – Klimaaktion im Museum, in: *cba.media*, January 24, 2023 (July 8, 2023).

<sup>46</sup>  
Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, 38–39.

<sup>47</sup>  
Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture*, London 2022, 72.

<sup>48</sup>  
Ibid., 75.



[Fig. 7]

Exhibition view of the exhibition #noclimartchange at the Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, 2023  
© Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck. Photo: Maria Kirchner.





[Fig. 8]

Exhibition view of the exhibition *#noclimartchange* at the Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, 2023  
© Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck. Photo: Maria Kirchner.

marginalized groups and invite them in this attributed function into the room of an elite.<sup>49</sup>

The museum is a room of an elite and the invitation extended to activist groups – marginalized not by identity, but by their political and radical practices, positioned outside and in opposition to mainstream policies and institutions – can be understood as politics of deference. By emphasizing its function as a platform, as in the case of “#noclimartchange”, the museum seems like an inclusive, non-hierarchical field rather than an exclusive room of elites. The focus on “participation” in their public relations communication represents a common feature of deferential politics. Sternfeld elucidates that in the paradigm of museum participation, art and culture should transition from being merely “for everyone” to “with everyone”.<sup>50</sup> The museum platform and its field of representation is constantly extending under the label of creating visibility for marginalized groups in society. However, the “invitee” is given a dubious role, as Sternfeld analyzes:

From the perspective of the ‘everyone’ (meaning marginalized positions that have not yet been won over as part of ‘everyone’ – or better, as target groups) to whom the new institutional discourses are directed, this means that they are to be invited to participate on the one hand and are to be available as objects of representation on the other.<sup>51</sup>

Sternfeld thus describes what could be characterized as the core problem of politics of deference. In Táiwò’s words, “rather than focusing on the actions of the corporations and algorithms that much more powerfully distribute attention”, the politics of deference – although often enacted with good intentions – only defer efforts to the symbolic sphere.<sup>52</sup> Which is why, as a default political orientation, it can even work counter to the interests of marginalized groups. It distorts the efforts to remodel the “whole house to the specific rooms that have already been built for us”.<sup>53</sup> The art museum seems to be particularly susceptible to this dead end since it fundamentally assumes its identity to be that of a “symbolic place” anyway, as for instance the director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle

<sup>49</sup>

Ibid., 74.

<sup>50</sup>

Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, 74.

<sup>51</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>

Táiwò, *Elite Capture*, 74.

<sup>53</sup>

Ibid., 83.

calls it in the context of the reading performance of *Letzte Generation*.<sup>54</sup>

Another important characteristic that distinguishes the art museum in this context is its dual nature as a “room”: it represents a metaphorical space that is exclusive and difficult to access, while also functioning as a physical architectural space that remains (relatively) open to entry. The climate activists took advantage of its physical accessibility. However, their actions also breached the boundaries and the laws that govern the museum as a metaphorical room – notably, from their marginal vantage point. But by excepting the deferential act of an official invitation inside, the tables are turned again. Even if it is only a small anteroom of the foyer that is given to activists as their own physical space, it does represent inclusion in the metaphorical room of the museum. Following Táiwò’s argument, this dynamic can be understood as policing or “regulating traffic within and between” rooms.<sup>55</sup> Sternfeld comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of the discursive use of the word “participation” in the museum, invoking philosopher Jacques Rancière’s theory of “politics vs. police”:

In Rancière’s political theory, politics takes place when the ‘part without a share’ demands its share in the name of equality – thus breaking through the policing logic of administration and organized inequality. Taking up this idea, participation seems to be above all a policing moment: voluntary self-participation in view of voluntary self-regulation.<sup>56</sup>

The museum hopes for the “voluntary self-regulation” of the activists, a kind of *quid pro quo* in exchange for an invitation into the museum’s rooms.

## VI. The Crisis of Cultural Legitimacy

The art museum adopts these various, often intersecting forms of climate activism appropriation mainly as a defensive strategy. This defense is not limited to countering the immediate threat of further gestural attacks on artworks in the museum’s care. Rather, I argue that the museum is responding to a much deeper, underlying challenge that it perceives to its position.

Over the past decades, feminist, anti-racist, queer, and postcolonial struggles have profoundly altered the role of the art museum, holding it accountable for its involvement in historical and contemporary injustices. Since the 2018 *Report on the Restitution of African*

<sup>54</sup>

Büchsenmann, *Lesen statt kleben*.

<sup>55</sup>

Táiwò, *Elite Capture*, 113.

<sup>56</sup>

Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, 77.

*Cultural Heritage*, European museums have, if slowly, begun returning looted artifacts, while US institutions debate deaccessioning to address racist and misogynistic collecting practices. Global movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have spurred debates over systemic sexism and racism in museums, leading to protests against board members and donors, such as Warren Kanders at the Whitney Museum and the Sackler family's ousting from sponsorships. The COVID-19 pandemic brought further scrutiny, with protests and strikes over inequitable staffing policies and layoffs, pushing some museums like the Guggenheim and Tate Modern toward unionization. More recently, US museums have become sites of pro-Palestinian demonstrations, while German institutions face heated debates around the Israel-Gaza conflict and the accusation of censorship.

These movements underscore a broader shift in the perception of art museums. As Sternfeld notes, the loss of faith in the museum's canonizing authority reflects a "crisis of representation". Former director of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Peter-Klaus Schuster, adds that museums "can no longer hide behind an authority, not even their own", and must justify their actions with transparency.<sup>57</sup> Having experienced a gradual loss of inherent cultural legitimacy over the past few decades, museums can no longer afford to selectively ignore or reject political discourse – increasingly, they rely on it.<sup>58</sup>

This shift in the museum's (self-)perception is mirrored in ICOM's redefinition of what a museum is supposed to be today. Changes enforced externally were also driven internally. Over the past decade, the activist turn in curatorial work has introduced critical practices within institutions. Curators, in particular, act as intermediaries who no longer see their role solely in the care of art, as suggested by the etymological origins of their profession, but rather in rethinking the canon, critically reflecting the mechanisms of the institution, and fostering discourse – partly by creating opportunities for debate. Activism from outside is being carried out and incorporated within the museum.

In one possible interpretation, the beginning of this development could be traced back to the first generation of artists engaging in the conceptual art practice of Institutional Critique in the 1960s. What started as an artistic inquiry into the workings of art institutions gradually permeated curatorial, academic and museum work, focusing on the injustices embedded within the structures of the art world. Over time, Institutional Critique itself became institutionalized. Writing a *Curriculum for Institutional Critique* in 2003, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson feared that the conceptual artistic prac-

<sup>57</sup>

Peter Klaus-Schuster cited in Barry Schwabsky, Agents of Malaise. Are Museums in Crisis?, in: *The Nation*, March 8, 2022 (January 30, 2025).

<sup>58</sup>

See Gavin Grindon, Curating with Counterpowers: Activist Curating, Museum Protest, and Institutional Liberation, in: *Social Text* 41/2, 2023, 19–44.



tice “threatens to devolve into a gimmick”.<sup>59</sup> This, she argued, was in large part because of its absorption by the art museum, dreaming of itself as “agent of the avant-garde” and, in the late 1990s, “has proclaimed itself to be not a site of political engagement but one of epiphanic inspiration”<sup>60</sup> – a belief that is still held by museum professionals like Wipplinger. I would argue that what has shifted since Bryan-Wilson wrote her curriculum, especially over the past decade, is that museums have indeed been progressively compelled to view themselves as “sites of political engagement”. Weakened by the erosion of their once unquestioned cultural authority, museums are now dependent on these external forces to carry counter-hegemonic discourse into them. Although this discourse is often highly critical of the institution, museums have adapted and learned to incorporate criticism, protest, or activism in order to remain relevant and maintain some of their hegemonic role. This may have pushed the museum into a position where its first response is to incorporate any kind of critique that enters through its doors, such as climate activism. However, the key difference between the appropriation of Institutional Critique and the emerging appropriation of climate activism by art museums is that climate activists are not artists and do not view their protests as art. Consequently, I argue, the museum is making a category mistake.

This category mistake by art museums might stem from what artist Gregory Sholette describes as the “increasingly tenuous line – if a line still exists at all –” between the “*Art of Activism* and the *Activism of Art*”.<sup>61</sup> The distinction between the “inside” and “outside” of institutions – and by extension, the art world, including its hierarchies and networks of power, influence, and capital – has become increasingly blurred and contested in both theory and practice. The “Activism of Art” over the last fifteen years has been dramatically enhanced by groups such as Decolonize This Place, Gulf Labor, Occupy Museums, P.A.I.N., and BP or Not BP, as well as Liberate Tate. They see the museum as “enmeshed with other institutions, notably those of large fossil fuels, arms, and pharmaceuticals companies”, as art historian Gavin Grindon explains their shared conviction.<sup>62</sup> The groups, while not necessarily understanding their activism as art, emerge from within the art world and frame their protests using the language and symbols of visual art and museum practices, rather than positioning themselves as outsiders. “With their own infrastructure rooted in the curatorial labor

<sup>59</sup>

Julia Bryan-Wilson, *A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art*, in: Jonas Ekeberg (ed.), *New Institutionalism*, Oslo 2003, 89–109, here 103.

<sup>60</sup>

Bryan-Wilson, *A Curriculum for Institutional Critique*, 103.

<sup>61</sup>

Gregory Sholette, *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art*, London 2022, 13.

<sup>62</sup>

Grindon, *Curating with Counterpowers*.

of movements”, Grindon explains “they do not rely on the career support structures, funding sources, or apparatus of representation required by professional artists.”<sup>63</sup> This enables them to occupy both inside and outside positions simultaneously. Visual Culture scholar Emma Mahony, who studies artistic climate activist groups such as Liberate Tate, describes this strategy as an “interstitial practice” that navigates between engagement and exodus, producing “double agents inside the museum”.<sup>64</sup>

In clear contrast to these groups, climate activists like Letzte Generation do not target museums or the art world. In fact, this approach is sometimes criticized for being too vague and lacking the precision needed for meaningful impact. As art historian Giovanni Aloï argues, unlike groups such as BP or Not BP, which target museums, sponsors, or board members complicit in the climate crisis, climate activists risk their actions being reduced to mere spectacles that are “instantly absorbed and assimilated by the capitalist media matrix that endlessly multiplies them”.<sup>65</sup> In this text, my focus, however, is not on evaluating the success or effectiveness of the activists’ strategy. Rather, I aim to highlight that Letzte Generation utilizes museums as platforms for impactful visuals – an approach described by Sholette as the “Art of Activism” – with their primary target being something other than the art world. While they enter museums, target artworks, and employ visual means – their actions are based on the production of images – their true targets are governments, political parties and their climate policies, as well as the public discourse and sentiment surrounding the urgency of the climate crisis. The museum serves first and foremost as an effective backdrop.

The activists thus forge a strategically deliberate relationship with the museum, leveraging what it can offer for their goals. In doing so, they consciously align themselves with the suffragettes, who over a century ago in Great Britain demanded women’s suffrage setting off a wave of *actual* art vandalism.<sup>66</sup> Art historian Nicola Guad discusses the rationale behind this protest strategy, noting that “attacks on paintings in galleries demonstrate ‘a subtle awareness of institutional power, for it aims to shift the struggle from the non-legitimized public space outside in the streets to the

<sup>63</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>

Emma Mahony, From Institutional to Interstitial Critique. The Resistant Force That Is Liberating the Neoliberal Museum from Below, in: T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, New York 2021, 409–417, here 412.

<sup>65</sup>

Giovanni Aloï, Art/Protest, in: *Art Monthly* 476, 2024, 13–16, here 15.

<sup>66</sup>

Just Stop Oil spokesperson Emma Brown specifically mentioned the conscious reference to the art vandalism of the Suffragettes during the panel discussion “Climate Activism in Art Spaces” at the conference *Climate Crisis >> Art Action* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, March 2–3, 2023.

hyper-legitimized public space inside the gallery”<sup>67</sup> I assume that, in addition to the dramatic effect of the museum as a stage and the visual and affective power of the splattered artworks, it is this subtle awareness of institutional power that brings the climate activists into the museum.

## VII. From Activism to Art? Artification as Defense Strategy

Ultimately, this seems to be a tug-of-war between climate activists and art museums, each pulling from opposite ends of the rope, attempting to shift the strategic relationship in their favor with the tools available to them. This struggle unfolds against the backdrop of two very different crises: the climate crisis and the crisis of the museum’s diminishing cultural legitimacy. It is most likely that climate activists are indifferent, even ignorant, to the museum’s crisis of legitimacy. In fact, I would contend that they continue to act precisely because they still hold a traditional conception of the museum’s role and identity, defined by its cultural hegemonic position and values such as permanence, preservation, originality, and the authority to assign value. Seen in this light, the tug-of-war is not only taking place against the backdrop of two crises, but is also unfolding on two – not entirely overlapping – terrains, with activists and museums strategically engaging on the basis of different conceptions of what a museum represents. However, I do not assert that the museum and its curators are indifferent to the climate crisis. What I hope to have shown, instead, is that the art museum, driven by its commitment to its contemporary role as a platform for societal discourse and engagement, incorporates climate activism through its transformation into something art-like. This dynamic raises questions concerning nothing less than the ontological status of art today.

The artification of climate activism by museums unfolds on multiple levels. As I have analyzed in various cases, it is often retrospectively: activist gestures or their remnants are pacified and integrated into the visual and spatial environment of an exhibition space through typical museological tools. At the Alte Nationalgalerie Berlin, this happened through the contextualization of a wall text, while at the Natural History Museum Berlin, the visual marker of two green rings were installed to direct the viewers’ attention to the traces of fingerprints left by climate activists as a contemporary document of the climate crisis that merits preservation. In this case, the activists’ gestures are incorporated into the museum’s archival logic: they are conserved and thus historicized.

In other cases, museums do not wait for activists to invade their space and leave their mark, but preemptively invite them into it. However, they were invited not as activists per se, but as legitimate

<sup>67</sup>

Nicola Gauld, “I Attack This Work of Art Deliberately.” Suffragette Activism in the Museum, in: Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (eds.), *Museum Activism*, New York 2019, 369–379, here 376.

participants in the art world. The Ferdinandeum invited four climate activist groups to curate an exhibition, where they staged the vandalization of paintings, smearing red paint over a photograph as an exhibit, and drawing vehicles on the museum's white wall for visitors to sit in front of, recreating a protest scene on a motorway. These mock-ups of protest scenes and dummy activist gestures then became part of the museum collection. Letzte Generation's invitation to eight major German museums on International Museum Day explicitly defined their presence as a performance. This redefinition of activism as performance art was further reinforced by ICOM's linguistic framing.

In both cases, the invitation led the activists to merely simulate or perform protest. The museum-driven transformation thus shifts climate activism from unauthorized, visually expressive protests in museum spaces to invited performances inspired by activism. The activists' own imitation of their protest stands in paradoxical contrast to the concurrent movement of contemporary art, which in the last decade has sought to impact and bring about change beyond the realm of art, on a material level. The desire and aim of directly effecting social, economic, political and especially ecological realities unite climate activists and a large part of contemporary art; they merely come from different directions – and now converge in the museum.

For Groys, only works that resist clear classification as either art or non-art – neither fully adhering to traditional artistic criteria nor belonging entirely to the everyday world – are deemed “new” and “alive” and thus worthy of inclusion in the museum's archiving logic.<sup>68</sup> One could argue that climate activist actions meet this standard. However, Groys specifies, only the fact that their authors act as “historical agents of this logic” makes them worthy of being archived. Climate activists do not consciously act within this logic. On the contrary, as Wolfgang Ulrich points out, while activists could claim their actions as art – “opening the door to an ironic or Dadaist interpretation”<sup>69</sup> – they deliberately refrain from invoking artistic freedom. Instead, they accept prison sentences, consciously facing the socio-political and legal consequences.

In summary, contemporary art and activism converge in the museum not because activists perceive their actions as art, but because the museum actively frames and accommodates them as such. This is not, I would contend, because this form of climate activism is genuinely regarded as *good* art – nor as new, radical, or even particularly interesting, for that matter. The question then becomes: What does it signify when museums incorporate material they do not value artistically? As proposed in my analysis, museums engage in what Herbert Marcuse termed “repressive tolerance”,

<sup>68</sup>

Groys, *Über das Neue*, 77.

<sup>69</sup>

Ulrich, *Die Auftritte der Letzten Generation aus kunsthistorischer Sicht*.

driven by a dual fear – fear of damage to their collections, and equally, fear of witnessing their already fragile cultural legitimacy and societal role erode further in the face of protest movements. Yet, the museum does not tolerate activism for what it is but instead tolerates its artfied version – a version it has actively constructed itself – an imitation staged for the museum’s world, resembling protest art, performance art, and the like. This dynamic exposes the core insight of this relationship: museums, not activists, drive this transformation and, when necessary, can carry out the entire process independently. As the intervention *A Few Degrees More* at the Leopold Museum has demonstrated, it is the museum that actively operates as an “historical agent of this logic”, navigating between the realms of art and the real, no longer dependent on the activist’s presence. The museum can both create and receive its own protest. This cycle of protest and assimilation – replicated by both the activists and the museum – suggests that the contemporary museum’s true occupation is the continuous negotiation of its own legitimacy.

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