

5.1 Object as target

As previously discussed, symbolic objects, through their various forms, can assume the role of target, tool, or stimulus within a political conflict (Abrams and Gardner 2023). First and foremost, an object may become a target-or even the primary target-of collective action, wherein its direct involvement constitutes an integral part of the contentious strategy. More broadly, Abrams and Gardner (2023) argue that such actions consist of the alteration, appropriation, or destruction of one or more symbolic objects, imbuing them with specific political meanings.

This dynamic is evident in the recent actions carried out by *Ultima Generazione* activists, who have defaced monuments, museums, and historic buildings using washable paint or other easily removable substances. As the activists themselves have explained in official statements and appearances on talk shows and news programs, these actions are not intended to damage the selected targets, but rather to stimulate public debate on the climate crisis and promote potential political solutions.

The images that follow not only provide useful elements to contextualize the actions, objectives, and targets of these protests, but also serve as powerful visual tools for analyzing the strategies employed by the movement in the pursuit of its aims.



Figure n.1: Activists deface Van Gogh's *Seminatore*, Rome.

Figure n.1 depicts three young *Ultima Generazione* activists inside one of Rome's museums, Palazzo Bonaparte, which at the time was hosting an exhibition of works by Vincent Van Gogh, with paintings on loan from the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. In the photograph, the activists are shown with their hands glued to the wall beside one of Van Gogh's most iconic paintings, *The Sower*. Standing before them is a fourth activist, whose specific role is to record and disseminate the entire protest action and the group's message via social media.

This element, present in virtually all the movement's protest actions, indicates that the act was clearly designed to be filmed, photographed, and shared, deliberately exploiting the immediacy of visual media as a means of amplifying and disseminating ideas, narratives, and meanings.

Moreover, as can be seen in the image, the painting is smeared with an organic substance – specifically, pea soup – thrown by the activists as a symbolic gesture of protest. It is important to note that, although not visible, the artwork is protected by a glass barrier that ensures its preservation. Therefore, as the activists themselves have declared, the intent was not to damage the painting, but to convey a precise message through a highly symbolic action directed at an especially iconic and communicative object.

Below are the words used by the activists to claim and contextualize their action:

«This is a desperate and scientifically grounded cry that cannot be dismissed as mere vandalism, but must be understood as an expression of visceral love for life and art. Everything we should have the right to witness in our present and future is being obscured by a real and imminent catastrophe, just as this pea soup has obscured the fieldwork (and thus the possibility of food security), the farmer's home (and thus the right not to be forced to migrate), and the energy radiating from the Sun across the scene (and thus the necessary investment in a just energy transition). We are simply calling for serious and timely government intervention: nonviolent direct actions will continue until citizens receive a response from their government to our demands to halt gas and coal use and to invest in at least 20 GW of renewable energy».
(fanpage.it – 4.11.2022)

As several scholars have argued (Cadeluppi 2022; Spreafico et al. 2016), images do not merely represent reality – they actively contribute to the construction and amplification of social meanings. The activists' statement provides a more detailed interpretive framework for the message they intend to convey through their protest action. However, more than words, it was the object chosen for the action – Van Gogh's painting and the constellation of symbolic meanings it evokes – that opened a space for discussion, however polarizing and controversial, about the climate crisis and governmental inaction.

In this sense, the artwork becomes a symbol of the cultural heritage that the activists aim to protect, but which is increasingly threatened by climate change. The contrast between the beauty of the artwork and the disruptive gesture draws attention to the theme of fragility, both of art and of the ecosystem. In this case, both the painting and its exhibition site symbolize tradition and cultural capital, which are placed at symbolic risk not by the activists' action – given the presence of a protective glass barrier – but by political inaction in the face of the ecological crisis.

Efforts to draw attention and raise the volume of public debate on the climate crisis have not been directed solely at government authorities and public opinion but have also targeted so-called *bystanders* – those who

passively witness protest actions as spectators. In the following case, involving a protest action targeting the Trevi Fountain, attention shifted to a specific category of bystanders: tourists.



Figure n.2: Activists pour vegetable charcoal into the Trevi Fountain, Rome.

Figure n.2 documents a recurring action by *Ultima Generazione* activists, consisting of pouring vegetable charcoal into the most iconic fountains of major Italian cities. In this instance, the protest takes place at the Trevi Fountain in Rome, a highly symbolic site of Italian artistic and cultural heritage.

In the image, seven activists are seen inside the fountain. Two of them hold a banner reading: “We won’t pay for fossil fuels,” while the others pour vegetable charcoal into the fountain’s waters using plastic jerrycans. As shown in the photograph, the action immediately draws the attention of the surrounding crowd, composed predominantly of tourists, as the Trevi Fountain represents one of the essential stops on the Roman cultural tourism circuit.

This action is clearly designed to provoke strong emotional reactions – particularly indignation and astonishment – by visually altering an iconic site. The contrast between the fountain’s white, symbolizing purity

and beauty, and the black of the poured charcoal serves as a metaphor for the contamination and environmental degradation caused by the climate crisis.

The aim, once again, is to stimulate critical reflection on the crisis and the ruptures it may generate – not only within natural and urban landscapes, but also across the economic, touristic, and cultural dynamics of the entire country.

Another protest action, the last selected for this analysis on symbolic targets, involved a symbol not only of architectural, historical, and cultural value, but also of political and administrative significance: *Palazzo Vecchio*, the seat of the Municipality of Florence.

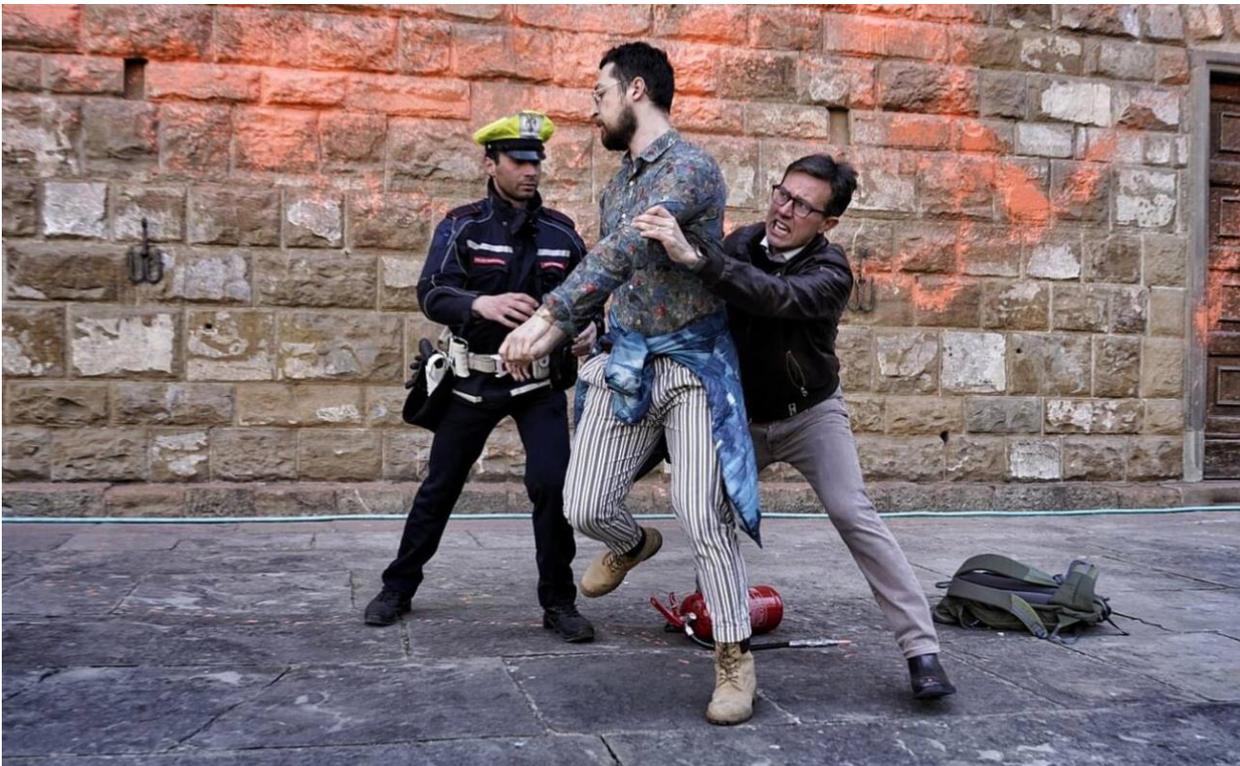


Figure n.3: Activist defaces the walls of *Palazzo Vecchio* with orange paint, Florence.

Figure n.3 captures a moment of heightened tension and confrontation between an activist from the *Ultima Generazione* movement, a local police officer, and the mayor of Florence, Dario Nardella. On the pavement lie a duffel bag and a red fire extinguisher – the same one used by the activist to spray washable orange paint on the walls of *Palazzo Vecchio*, which can be seen in the background.

Once again, the protest target is a historical-cultural symbol that, through the activist's action, is transformed into a platform from which to launch a political message. However, as previously mentioned, *Palazzo*

Vecchio is not only an icon of Italian historical and cultural heritage but also an emblem of the political-administrative system. From this perspective, the protest extends beyond mere criticism of institutions; it constitutes a direct appeal to authorities and public administrators to take a stand on global issues such as the climate crisis.

In this case, the activists are not simply denouncing political inertia; they are using *Palazzo Vecchio* as a symbolic battleground, one in which the classical configurations of conflict materialize, namely those between friends and enemies, and between adversaries and allies (Mouffe 1999, 2013). The mayor's physical intervention, as he steps in personally to defend the city's historical heritage and urban decorum, places him in direct opposition to the activists' demands, preliminarily shaping the trajectory of the ongoing conflict. In the hours following the protest, he would go on to label the activists as "barbarians."

« They are barbarians. This is not how one protests; they should be defending civilization. ».
(tg24.Sky.it – 17.2.2023)

This episode dramatically, and in some ways tragically, illustrates the extreme level of polarization that has been reached between those who view the climate crisis as an urgent priority and those who, by contrast, appear distant, unresponsive, and seemingly disengaged from the severity of the situation and the need for concrete solutions. On one side stand the activists and their supporters; on the other, symbolically represented by Mayor Dario Nardella, a segment of the Italian political establishment.

5.2 Objects as tools

Selbin (2023) argues that symbols can be employed in as many ways as human imagination allows. However, as Abrams and Gardner (2023) emphasize, there are limits that distinguish what can be considered a symbol from what remains merely an object. Not all objects, in fact, carry symbolic value within the dynamics of contentious politics. According to the authors, for an object to be considered part of contentious politics, it must possess an intrinsic symbolic meaning closely tied to the context in which it is used.

From this perspective, symbolic objects must represent, reflect, or at times refract elements of resistance, struggle, solidarity, and dissent. More broadly, they must embody collective action driven by individuals within a specific organizational context – whether a small group or an entire population. For this reason, such objects are frequently appropriated and repurposed beyond their original contexts. This is the case with the fire extinguisher used by *Ultima Generazione* activists and the orange paint with which they "sign" their protest actions – and even more generally, the color orange itself, which recurs as a visual leitmotif throughout nearly all of the movement's actions.

These cases demonstrate how objects can acquire multiple and fluid meanings, transgressing the boundaries of their conventional use and entering new contexts – social, yes, but above all, political.

The following images capture key moments in the protest actions of *Ultima Generazione*.