Art, Soup, and Climate Change

“What is worth more- art or life?” In today's world, rhetoric is one of the most powerful tools people can possess. It gives one the ability to persuade and educate those around them in hopes of enacting change in the world. On October 14, 2022, in Room 43 of the National Gallery in London, Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland, two climate change activists, took cans of soup and threw them on the priceless Vincent Van Gogh painting “Sunflowers.” The young activists are a part of the Just Stop Oil climate group that “has been staging non-violent demonstrations across the United Kingdom in the hope of stopping and bringing awareness to fossil fuels” (Feldman) and the issues that they are presenting to both the planet and people all around the world. After throwing their cans of tomato soup, Plummer and Holland sat down while they glued themselves to the wall and then proceeded to give a short speech.

“What is worth more- art or life? Is it worth more than food? Worth more than justice? Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people? The cost of living crisis is part of the cost of oil crisis. Fuel is unaffordable to millions of cold, hungry families. They can’t even afford to heat a tin of soup.”

But what do rhetoric and the rhetorical situation have to do with art, soup, and climate change? According to Lloyd Bitzer, a famous rhetorician who wrote about the idea of the Rhetorical Situation, "Rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world” (Bitzer, 3). These
young women are acting to produce change, and their rhetoric speaks to an issue they believe in: how fossil fuels are affecting both people and the planet. Bitzer’s theory of the Rhetorical Situation has three parts: “the first is exigence, the second is audience, and the last part are the constraints” (6). Rhetorical analysis examines the rhetorical situation and what events produce positive actions or adverse reactions. This paper will use Bitzer's theory of rhetorical situation to determine if the attempted destruction of a priceless painting was worth its noble cause or if the activists missed the mark on creating actual change and inspiration.

“Imperfection marked by urgency” (6) is Bitzer's definition of exigence, or in layman's terms, exigence is an event that leads to discourse and is the first part of a rhetorical situation. It is no secret that throughout history, people in government positions have brushed aside the issue of climate change and fossil fuels, not caring how it affects the greater population, only selfishly caring how it affects themselves. In the United Kingdom, oil and gas are regulated by the Oil and Gas Authority, which is corrupt within itself. An article released by The Guardian discusses how “three of the 13 members of the board of directors and senior management team of the Oil and Gas Authority hold sizeable shareholdings in oil companies, and eight of the 13 previously worked in the oil and gas industry” (Harvy et al.). So, not only are activists fighting inaction, but they are also fighting people who actively hold positions of power with the intent to hurt others and the planet for personal and economic gain. These members of the board of directors have the ability to protect their harmful industry with no repercussions or restraints.

For decades, climate change and human rights activists have fought this inaction and anti-environmentalist mindset, calling out politicians and people holding seats of power for their lack of action and blatant disregard surrounding the issue of climate change and fossil fuels. People holding seats of power who act only in their own interest is what prompted Plummer and
Holland to create the spectacle they did at the National Gallery in London. Action is the only thing that can fight idleness, which the two activists sought to do.

The second part of the rhetorical situation is the audience, or “the people who function as mediators of change” (7). Plummer and Holland sought to reach two core audiences: government officials and the citizens of the world. Firstly, their message is intended for government officials because these are the people who have the ability to enact real change. Through policies and legislation, politicians can help the people suffering from fuel and oil costs, with the added benefit of helping to curb global warming. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, government officials have a reputation for disregarding anything related to climate change. What's worse is they often benefit from the oil and gas industry and seek to stop bills and laws that would restrict fossil fuels. Hence, Plummer and Holland sought to reach a second audience.

When the government does nothing, the next step to accomplishing change is by gaining support from the people and then turning that support into petitions and protests. The second but more critical audience is the people of the world. In the age of technology, almost everything can reach thousands, if not millions, of people within a matter of seconds. People today often choose to record rather than to stop or engage with the things happening around them. The bystanders in the gallery recorded the rhetorical situation. Within a matter of minutes, it was plastered all over social media, and just hours later, the Smithsonian, the National Gallery, and others were reacting to the incident. Plummer and Holland's stunt went viral. Their actions aimed to gain the people's support and raise awareness of the issues that fossil fuels are creating. Due to the nature of the internet and how quickly information is able to be spread, Plummer and Holland turned their spectacle global, leaving people all over the world questioning their government and wanting to
see real change and action. However, on the flip side, certain constraints come along with the attempted destruction of a priceless Van Gogh painting.

The last part of Bitzer's theory of rhetorical situation, and the most important, is the constraints that come with specific actions. Constraints can make or break a rhetorical situation and can either cause change or be the catalyst for stopping it. According to Bitzer, a constraint is “made up of things that have the power to affect the decision or action needed to modify the change” (8). Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland had a vast amount of constraints when they chose to throw cans of soup on a Van Gogh painting and then give a speech. The first constraint comes from their own actions. In her speech, Plummer remarks on how people are “starving and can't afford to heat a tin of soup” when just moments before, she wasted a can of soup that could have gone to a family in need, just as she is preaching. Her actions came across as wasteful and hypocritical and were widely criticized in the media.

Next, there is the issue of museum conduct. A museum is an academic setting meant for people to come and enjoy, think about, and debate art, so it should be no surprise that attempting to destroy a priceless work of art is frowned upon. Anyone who studies art or enjoys looking at it was outraged by this event. Fortunately, the painting was not damaged, but would it have caused real change regarding fossil fuels and oil if it was? Additionally, the Van Gogh piece shows off nature and its beauty. Vincent Van Gogh dedicated his life to capturing and preserving nature's beauty, so throwing soup, especially on his work, brought on even more criticism. It would have been more effective to throw soup on a piece of art where the artist has made controversial choices.

Additionally, there is the issue of what art is worth compared to the planet. Another ironic constraint is that the painting is probably worth more than ever after Plummer and Hollands act.
While this has yet to be confirmed, when art is attempted to be destroyed or has a unique history, the price of that artwork increases. For example, the most expensive piece of art ever sold by an American artist, Andy Warhol's *Shot Sage Blue Marilyn*, was so expensive because of its history. So, in an attempt to deface and remark on the price of art, the activists probably made it more expensive.

The last constraint of Plummer and Holland's stunt is the act itself. Their goal was to bring awareness to fossil fuels and their costs. However, because their actions were so absurd and strikingly uncalled for, the act overshadowed the issue they were trying to bring awareness to. One of Plummer and Holland's goals was to reach the people of the world to inform them of the many issues that fossil fuel and oil costs are presenting. Their act did go viral, but it was for the wrong reasons. People were more focused on the Van Gogh painting and whether or not it was damaged than they were on fossil fuels. Their act sparked controversy, and people spent more time debating whether or not the attempted destruction of a Van Gogh painting was worth the cause. Plummer and Holland brought more attention to themselves than they did to climate change, ultimately making this claim to fame short-lived with no legacy or change left behind.

The purpose of rhetorical discourse is to produce change. Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland successfully brought a tremendous amount of awareness to the issue of the cost of fossil fuels and oil and how it is affecting the earth and its people. However, their stunt was all over the media and made international news solely because of how controversial and shocking it was. The article titles read “Soup on Van Gogh” rather than “Fossil Fuel Crisis.” They challenged people to question their governments and the choices that politicians have made regarding climate and oil issues. However, they also created a lot of debate, drawing attention away from their cause. The world is at a point where unity is needed, not more division. Ultimately, Plummer and
Holland’s act brought awareness and discussion but no real change. So “What is worth more- art or life?”
Dear Reader,

Climate change issues and art are two things I find important, so naturally, when it came time to pick a topic for this paper, this recent event seemed like a natural choice. However, when I first sat down to write this paper, I could not think of a single topic. I started this paper about three different times, focusing on three various topics, anything from World War II to Kanye West debacles. Finally, one night in the library, after about eight shots of espresso, two coffees, and an hour of mindlessly scrolling through social media, I remember this event. The paper then started flowing out of me, and I was able to create a good draft. In terms of revisions, I did not change anything except for a few minor grammatical things. I did, however, add a paragraph at the end explaining how throwing the soup was a constraint because it drew attention away from the cost of fossil fuel and put it on whether or not the Van Gogh painting was destroyed. It strengthened my argument that it was an unsuccessful rhetorical situation because it did not enact real change and only produced controversy. If I were to complete this assignment again, I would make sure that when I begin writing, I know what I want to write about and formulate an outline. For this assignment, I started about three different drafts because I had yet to decide what I wanted to write about. This was not only a massive waste of time but also jumbled my brain when I finally figured out that I wanted to write about art, soup, and climate change.
Works Cited:


