

## Dubai gallery exhibition reflects on activists targeting iconic artworks

*An exhibition by a German artist explores how acts of vandalism targeting major museum masterpieces shape the cultural landscape long after the protests.*

SHARJAH, EMIRATE OF SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, January 14, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- By Ifath Arwah, University of Sharjah

A thought-provoking exhibition designed to shed light on acts of vandalism against famous artworks in world museums has opened in Dubai, drawing significant attention from enthusiasts.

German artist Tor Seidel, a lecturer of fine art photography at the University of Sharjah, examines these incidents as performative gestures that continue to shape the cultural life of artworks long after the protests have ended.

Titled *Riposte*, the exhibition, featuring photography, reveals a rupture in how museum spaces are read and trusted and how easily acts of disruption can visually resemble sanctioned artistic gestures.

In recent years, European museums have increasingly become focal points for climate activism. Protesters have hurled soup, paint, and other substances at iconic paintings—often protected by glass—while gluing themselves to walls or frames as cameras capture the spectacle.

These actions have sparked fierce criticism from museum professionals and the public, igniting debates about the ethics of using cultural heritage as a platform for political and activist purposes, the legitimacy of such tactics, and the long-term implications for conservation.



The Berlin attack targeted Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's drawing *The Clown*, a moment of misrecognition, which forms the conceptual foundation of *Riposte*. Credit: Tor Seidel.

Seidel's exhibition, hosted at the XVA Gallery in Dubai (October 15 - December 11) and to be shown at the REKN Art Space in Sharjah in spring 2026, does not seek to defend or condemn these acts. Instead, it approaches them analytically, asking: what happens when protest intervenes not only in politics but also in art history itself?

Can protests rewrite art's history?

The artist recalls first encountering the aftermath of an attack while walking to the Alte National Gallery in Berlin, near his home. "I was sure that this would be a contemporary art installation," he said, recalling the moment.

The Berlin attack, says Seidel, targeted Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's drawing *The Clown*. "It was only when I read the accompanying text next to a wall that I realized that the splashes of fake blood on the centuries-old wallpaper were not art, but something else, something based on a protest action."

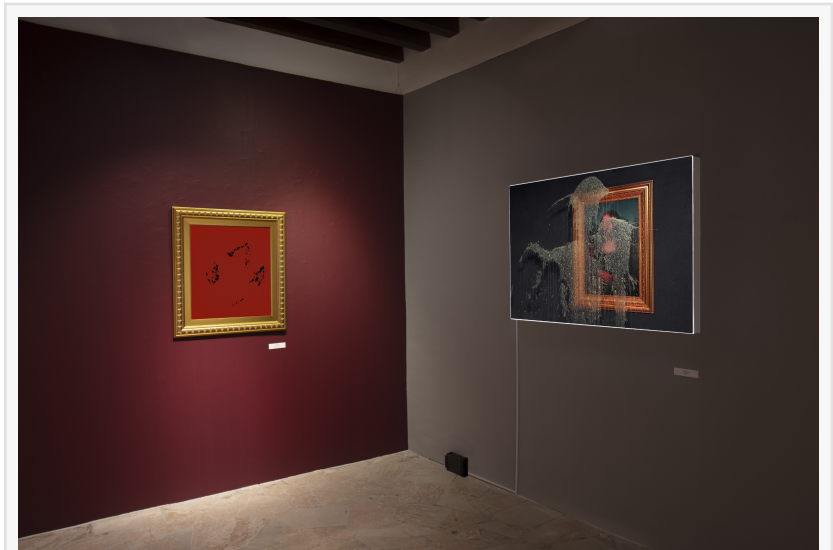
This moment of misrecognition forms the conceptual foundation of *Riposte*.

For Seidel, activist interventions are not merely external disruptions—they generate new meanings, images, and narratives around the original works, transforming the way we perceive art and its cultural context.

Climate activists have targeted iconic artworks such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in Paris and Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* in London, transforming some of the world's most famous artworks into stages of protest.

When protests become art

Reflecting on these incidents, Seidel is deliberate in his choice of words. "I wouldn't call it vandalism," he explains. "Let's consider these actions as acts of civil disobedience."



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*Riposte* challenges activists' claims that such interventions are harmless because artworks are protected by specialized glass. Credit: Tor Seidel

Seidel's research, which is part of his PhD thesis at the Cambridge School of Art, ARU, examines how activist groups craft their narratives through carefully designed messages and videos.

"I've tried to analyze their published videos, statements, and the syntax of their simplified messages," which relay themes like "We know the truth; we must save the world; if you don't follow us, we will all die in 2050."

When studied closely, he argues, these actions reveal a structure that aligns closely with traditions of performance art. "If you look closely at these messages and the nature of their activist attacks, you discover another layer, closely related to performance art. Therefore, I speak more of artistic acts than protests."

Museums have a role to play

Seidel suggests that museums play a pivotal role in this dynamic. They are not neutral spaces but institutions imbued with symbolic authority and expectation. "One should understand that visitors from all over the world book flights, hotels, and tickets to see the Mona Lisa," he notes.

When museums close following an attack, those visitors often leave disappointed. "If these visitors are then turned away from the museum without even having seen the painting because the museum is closed for damage assessment, one should expect a lack of understanding."

The anger that follows, Seidel observes, is rarely directed at the institutions themselves but at the activists. "Naturally, visitors are upset and disagree with the activists' arguments, but this in no way prompts the movement to reconsider its methods and demands."

Museums' role in activist dynamics



The exhibition unfolds three phases, tracing how an attacked artwork moves through cultural systems. Credit: Tor Seidel



The Riposte includes texts from protest groups, museum directors, conservators, and visitors. Credit: Tor Seidel

In his exhibition, *Riposte*, Seidel frames these actions as an uninvited occupation of institutional space. "Quite simply—and this is one of my points—they are uninvitedly turning the hallowed museum space into their stage, operating outside the white cube, in public."

"No one asked them to; there is a public order; museums are open to everyone. However, visitors want to view works of art in peace and with dignity. All of this is being called into question."

When asked about the meaning of *Riposte*, Seidel explains, "It's familiar in some European languages, like French, and is generally used by one of the protest groups. It literally means "Counterattack now." Or 'Answer, with demands.' In military terminology, a *riposte* refers to striking an opponent's vulnerable point, a fitting description for actions that deliberately target the most revered icons of art history."

The exhibition unfolds in three phases, tracing how an attacked artwork moves through cultural systems. In the first phase, Seidel reconstructs the immediate aftermath of an intervention. "So, you would still see the aftermath, like splashes of pumpkin soup," he notes. Importantly, the act itself is absent. What remains is the altered state of the artwork and the behavior of those who encounter it.

"What interests me here is that many visitors wouldn't even recognize that something was going on, or they would ignore it, while these activists are actually performing," he points out.

### Activism and digital artifacts

Reflecting on videos depicting these acts, Seidel highlights the diversity of responses captured in museum footage. "It's a very diverse behavior; while some visitors enjoy this like a performance, others ignore it or run away."

The second phase, which Seidel calls *metamorphosis*, explains how the altered artwork becomes something new. This transformation, he argues, is irreversible because it is sustained by digital circulation. "This is a reflection on the moment when the work is being changed, as the alteration is permanently visible on the internet, and the posted videos of the attack groups go viral."

The history of famous works of art has already been marked by past attacks, thefts, and damage, as documented in the so-called history of iconoclasm, Seidel explains. "There is a long history of damage to works of art for religious, political, or psychological reasons. For example, there is a history of how often the *Mona Lisa* has been attacked, stolen, or damaged. You can no longer view the *Mona Lisa* without this context. It is part of the *Mona Lisa*."

The final phase addresses what happens next. "In a third move, which I call *institutionalization*, the new work is being integrated into the world of art: it is being collected, exhibited, curated,

and auctioned.

"This is not as hypothetical as it sounds, because activists are invited to museums to present their 'work,' demands, and forms of protest. I see several conflicting interests at play here. An open letter from 100 cultural figures in Great Britain defended two 'Just Stop Oil' activists and placed them in the same category as artists who simply use the works of other artists, sorting them into the long-lasting tradition of iconoclasm. This trivializes the attacks. So, my approach is not so hypothetical after all."

### Debunking the myth of harmless attacks

According to Seidel, those who target works of art in large museums are primarily seeking attention. "Being visible is essential because it's the most important thing. Today, without videos and photos posted on social media, nothing seems to exist. So, with these museum actions, a videographer is always included to document the event and post it afterward."

Seidel challenges activists' claims that such interventions are harmless because artworks are protected by specialized glass. "I spoke with conservators at the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin. They are deeply concerned about the damage and the restoration work required."

"Therefore, I find it simply wrong when activists and their supporters claim they are only using tomato soup and that nothing will happen because there is a protective glass pane in front of the artwork."

In this case, he notes that restoration costs exceeded €100,000, including damage to historic wallpaper surrounding the painting.

Despite the politically charged subject matter, Seidel resists framing the exhibition as an argument for or against climate activism. "I don't take any position, but I am not questioning climate change."

His concern lies with the oversimplification of a complex issue. "The whole discussion about climate change is very complex, too complex to be reduced to symbolic acts like throwing soup on artworks and simplistic demands."

Rather than prescribing conclusions, Riposte brings together a range of voices. Seidel includes texts from protest groups, museum directors, conservators, and visitors. "Regarding the viewer's context, I included texts from very diverse perspectives. This allows viewers to complete their own view while reading, as this sheds light on a broader perspective."

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