

The Arts in Society: Value, Power, and Change

Seminar Activity

Overview

Below is a selection of real-world case studies where the arts have triggered public controversy, challenged norms, or surfaced hidden tensions. Each example raises questions about how the arts function in society not just as creative expression, but as a space where values, power, and responsibilities are negotiated.

Instructions

1. In pairs or groups of 3, select 2 case studies from the resource list provided.
2. At least one must be Singapore-based.
3. For each selection, select and apply two *relevant* critical lenses:
 - Value & Importance
 - Power
 - Change & Continuity
 - Control & Responsibility
4. Use the guiding questions below to frame your analysis.
5. Support your points with specific references to the selected case studies. You may present your findings as:
 - A short analytical write-up (approx. 400-500 words); OR
 - A comparative slide presentation (5–6 slides)

Guiding Questions by Lens

Use these to shape your group's discussion and written analysis. *You do not need to answer every question*, but your response should reflect thoughtful engagement with **how** and **why** the arts provoke value judgments, power struggles, social change, or calls for control. You could also consider the prompts at the bottom of each quadrant to practise cross-lens thinking.

Value & Importance	Power
▪ Why are stakeholders interested in this artwork or issue? What do they stand to gain or lose? ▪ How central are these artistic or cultural issues to their identity, livelihood, or survival?	▪ How do and to what extent are stakeholders able to influence artistic outcomes, public opinion, or institutional decisions? ▪ Who defines what is acceptable, legitimate, or worthy in this artistic space?

▪ How do their values or interests clash or align with others? ▪ What kind of value is being debated -- artistic, cultural, symbolic, economic, moral? ▪ Is one set of values being privileged over others? If so, whom? <i>Consider linking to Power:</i> Who gets to decide which values are upheld? <i>Consider linking to Control:</i> Which types of value are sometimes used to justify restrictions?	▪ Do any stakeholders exercise power in excess or to the disadvantage of others? ▪ How do power imbalances (e.g. between state and artist, or global North/South) shape the debate? <i>Consider linking to Value:</i> Are some voices given more weight because of who they represent? <i>Consider linking to Change:</i> Is power shifting or staying the same?
Control & Responsibility ▪ Can one stakeholder be justified in assuming control on behalf of a community/tradition/community? ▪ Is the control exercised (e.g. censorship, funding decisions, edits) proportionate or excessive? ▪ What responsibilities do artists have when their work enters public or contested space? ▪ How far should people assume responsibility for how they are represented in the arts? (E.g. marginalised communities, cultures, gender) <i>Consider linking to Change:</i> Can older systems of control keep up with new realities? <i>Consider linking to Power:</i> When someone's voice is "silenced," who benefits?	Change & Continuity ▪ What changes have emerged that disrupt artistic or cultural norms? ▪ Who seeks artistic or social change? Do their aims clash or co-exist with others? ▪ Are institutions or audiences more likely to be open or resistant to new ideas brought about by this artwork/issue? Why? ▪ Which societal values are evolving, and which are held on to? <i>Consider linking to Power:</i> Are new actors more likely to gain influence or be shut out? <i>Consider linking to Value:</i> Do shifts in taste or norms affect what is considered valuable?

Resource Links

- **Cultural Appropriation in Fashion** – Global brands like Zara are accused of using Indigenous Mexican designs without permission. Such cases pose ethical responsibility.

questions: who “owns” cultural art motifs and who profits? They also involve power dynamics between Western corporations and marginalized communities. ([Mexico accuses Zara and Anthropologie of cultural appropriation | Fashion | The Guardian](#))

- **AI-Generated Art Wins Competition** – In 2022, an AI-created painting won first prize at a state fair, angering human artists. This case exemplifies how new technology challenges traditional notions of creativity, asks if our definition of art should change and who has the power in art when algorithms can create images. ([AI-Generated Art Won a Prize. Artists Aren't Happy. - The New York Times](#))
- **Climate Activists vs. Art Museums** – In 2022, protesters threw soup on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (behind glass) and then glued themselves to the wall. It's a provocative example of using art's publicity to address climate change, raising responsibility debates. ([Just Stop Oil activists throw soup at Van Gogh's Sunflowers | Just Stop Oil | The Guardian](#))
- **Elgin Marbles / Parthenon Sculptures Dispute** – A long-standing conflict between Greece and the UK over marble sculptures removed from the Parthenon in the early 1800s. Greece argues that the removal was unethical, and that the sculptures should be returned. The British Museum maintains that they were legally acquired and are viewed by millions annually. [Elgin Marbles: What are they and why is there a row about them? | BBC](#)
- **Ai Weiwei's Art and Activism** – Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's works (like dropping a Han Dynasty urn or his installation *Sunflower Seeds*) often openly criticise government policies. Ai was detained by authorities in 2011 for his outspokenness. His case illustrates how art can give voice to dissent and the resulting control that governments attempt to exert. It raises issues of artists' responsibility and how art can drive change in society. ([Ai Weiwei detained by Chinese police - The Guardian](#))
- **Banksy's Shredded Painting** – Refers to Banksy's *Girl with Balloon* that self-shredded at auction in 2018. The stunt itself became art and increased the painting's monetary value prompting discussion about how we value art and the power of spectacle in the art market. ([Banksy auction stunt leaves art world in shreds | Banksy | The Guardian](#))
- **“Oscars So White”** – A social media hashtag/protest that emerged in 2015–2016 when all 20 Oscar acting nominees were white. This controversy in the film industry questions who has influence and whose stories are told. This connects art to social change, asking how important recognition and diversity are in the cultural landscape. ([9 Years after #OscarsSoWhite, here's what diversity looks like at the 2024 Academy Awards](#))
- **Beeple's \$69 Million NFT Sale** – In 2021, digital artist Beeple sold an NFT artwork for an unprecedented US\$69.3 million at Christie's. This event signals a seismic **change** in how art is bought/sold (blockchain, NFTs) and questions what gives art its value. What has stayed the same and what has changed?. ([Beeple sold an NFT for \\$69 million | The Verge](#))
- **Samsui Woman Mural Controversy (Singapore, 2024)** – A mural in Chinatown showing a samsui woman holding a cigarette sparked public complaints and a directive from URA to alter the image. The case triggered national debate about respectability politics, public art, and the boundaries of free expression. ([Commentary: The controversy over the samsui woman mural is not just about art - CNA](#))

- **Graphic Novel Censorship (Singapore)** – In 2015, Singapore’s National Arts Council withdrew a grant for the graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* due to “sensitive content” about Singapore’s history. This local example spotlights issues arising when government bodies set boundaries on art that critiques them. ([NAC withdraws grant for graphic novel publisher due to “sensitive content” - TODAY](#))
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Worked Example

Just Stop Oil protest at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (2022)

[The Guardian – Just Stop Oil activists throw soup at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*](#)

Lens 1: Value & Importance

Why are stakeholders interested in this artwork or issue?

Activists view the climate crisis as a civilisational emergency: any platform that draws attention to ecological collapse holds vital communicative value. The museum and general public view *Sunflowers* as a treasured masterpiece, part of the shared cultural heritage.

How central are these artistic or cultural issues to their identity or survival?

For Just Stop Oil, the protest was about the survival of ecosystems, future generations, and planetary systems. For art institutions, the safeguarding of cultural heritage is equally existential, rooted in preservation of identity, history, and aesthetic legacy.

What kind of value is being debated?

The artwork holds artistic and cultural value, while its preservation reflects a broader moral commitment to history and legacy. The moral urgency of climate action confronts this reverence with the question: what do we truly prioritise when both culture and climate are at stake?

Is one set of values being privileged over others?

The backlash against the protest suggests that society still places higher value on cultural artefacts than on ecological warnings—though the debate sparked by the act suggests that this hierarchy is being questioned.

Lens 2: Power

How do and to what extent are stakeholders able to influence artistic outcomes, public opinion, or institutional decisions?

Though they hold no formal authority, the activists used spectacle to command media attention and redirect public discourse. Museums, by contrast, hold cultural power to determine what is considered sacred or untouchable in society.

Who defines what is acceptable or legitimate in this artistic space?

Institutions like the National Gallery set norms about how art should be interacted with and displayed. Protesters deliberately violated those norms to question their sanctity.

Do any stakeholders exercise power in excess or to the disadvantage of others?

Some argue that the activists disrupted public trust and crossed a moral line. Others argue the real abuse of power lies in governments and corporations continuing fossil fuel investment despite dire warnings, thus disempowering future generations.

How do power imbalances shape the debate?

The clash highlights power imbalances in that activists have moral urgency but limited institutional influence; museums and media shape narratives, but can't ignore escalating climate discontent.

Lens 3: Change & Continuity

What changes have emerged that disrupt artistic or cultural norms?

Radical protest strategies have evolved from marches and speeches to direct interventions in cultural spaces. Art is no longer seen as neutral ground; it's being redefined as a platform for socio-political urgency.

Who seeks artistic or social change? Do their aims clash or co-exist with others'?

The protesters seek systemic environmental change. Institutions seek to uphold cultural continuity and preserve artefacts. These aims clash when art is co-opted as a stage for disruptive messaging but they also reveal a shared interest in long-term survival (climate and culture).

Are institutions or audiences adapting or resisting? Why?

Initial resistance from the gallery was swift; condemnation and calls for prosecution. Yet broader public discourse included support and reflection. Adaptation is uneven: some reject the methods, others acknowledge their impact.

Do these shifts reflect evolution in values or resistance to change?

Both. The fact that such protests are happening (and being discussed seriously) suggests value shifts toward urgency and ethical disruption. But defensive reactions also show resistance, especially when cultural traditions are perceived as under attack.

Lens 4: Control & Responsibility**Can one stakeholder be justified in assuming control on behalf of others?**

Just Stop Oil assumed the moral responsibility of speaking "on behalf of" future generations and the planet, an act of moral proxy. Some see this as brave; others see it as presumptuous.

Is the control exercised (e.g. security, condemnation, legal action) proportionate or excessive?

The protest was non-destructive (the glass protected the painting) but generated outrage. Some argue legal repercussions are disproportionate given the symbolic nature of the act; others see such deterrents as necessary to protect public property and decorum.

What responsibilities do artists or activists have when their work enters public or contested space?

Activists have a duty to provoke responsibly: balancing impact with public perception. The choice to protest a protected artwork rather than a vulnerable target shows a degree of calibration.

How far should people assume responsibility for how they are represented in the arts?

N/A

Insights / Reflection

This case underscores that art is never neutral. The intrinsic value of *Sunflowers* may remain unchanged, but its meaning has been politicised. The protest confronts society with uncomfortable questions: What do we protect? Who gets to decide what's sacred? And when the planet is burning, do we guard the paintings, or stop the fire?