

# REPORT

## Extinction Rebellion

In ten days of dramatic action in April, the rapidly growing movement Extinction Rebellion closed down four key London sites to traffic and set up camps reminiscent of Occupy at St Paul's, creating headlines worldwide. What is less known is that a core group of visual artists, along with musicians and poets, were at the heart of the planning. Gavin Turk made headlines by getting arrested and was present at many of the actions, but others, such as Jennet Thomas, Ackroyd/Harvey and Hercules Fisherman, were key to the Rebellion's cell-like structures.

It is also not well known that the emblematic hourglass symbol was actually created in 2011 by an East London artist known as ESP and displayed on a street sign in an exhibition organised by Human Nature in 2014. Unlike the ubiquitous CND symbol, created by British designer Gerald Holtom, Extinction Rebellion has tried hard to prevent the inevitable commercialisation of the XR symbol, even frowning on it being used as a T-shirt design while hardcore supporters proudly sport it on DIY XR ribbons, flags and banners.

The youthful movement has not been without its critics, some of whom have commented on the iconicisation of the 16-year-old activist Greta Thunberg, who has come up with the most hair-raising and effective slogan: 'Our House in on Fire!' (Sci-fi enthusiasts will remember John Brunner's uncanny prediction in *The Sheep Look Up* of the 'Trainite' movement – slogan 'Stop you're killing me!' with a symbol not unlike ESP's design.) A recent article in *Open Democracy* cited 'Green Nationalism' in XR's statements against 'the destruction of all we hold dear: this nation, its peoples, our ecosystems and the future of generations to come ... XR's use of apocalyptic imagery leads us to focus upon possible dystopia caused by climate collapse for the Global North, rather than the very real apocalyptic present for many in the Global South'. Also, some seasoned veterans of

Climate Camps feel battles won and lost in the past have not been acknowledged.

Thomas disagrees: 'XR, as a movement, is not flawless. Inside there are fierce debates on strategy and intense awareness of the political dimensions of global climate change. I wish some of those critiquing on the left would further research their analysis by getting involved.' What was the significance of artists being at the centre, rather than the periphery of the movement? 'Artists can affirm their role as truth-tellers, asserting the awfulness of our situation but at the same time that we have the imaginative strength, as humans, to make change happen,' Thomas states, continuing, 'the first aim of XR is a wake-up call – "Tell the truth" – but apocalyptic activism is not enough ... there must be another kind of world-building.'

pristine, some gently wilting in the heat, and I felt an almost uncontrollable swell of emotion. I think most of us had tears streaming down our faces. I felt profoundly in that moment just how powerful the image of the Brigade was, though I still couldn't have known just how much strength, emotion, and momentum it would build as the rebellion progressed. Where the Brigade went, the eyes of the world followed.'

Another criticism has been that XR has been a white middle-class movement. Yet I found many artists from diverse backgrounds getting involved. Artist Vinita Khanna told me her reason for joining: 'Many of us are bewildered by the collective amnesia that dominates society's response to the accelerating forecast of ecological disaster and climate change. Like thousands who have marched and



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Thomas has worked with other artists, including Kat Brendel, to develop the Skeletons Rebellion group, which she reasons thus: 'The skeleton as image is the most ancient, universal, direct way of figuring death. We are signalling the human and species deaths already happening globally ... But it's also a defiant symbol of life-in-death; our skeletons on poles jiggle and dance hilariously. It acted like a lightning-rod, attracting all kinds of people who wouldn't see themselves as activists or artists – and the act of making together has created new solidarities.'

The April actions also saw some highly effective performances around London in the unsettling and visually impactful 'Invisible Circus – Red Brigade' – founded by Doug Francisco – where androgynous figures in bright red 'swarmed' as a group, strategically placing their bodies between protesters and police. Laura Coppin described the effect: 'The connection between us, each other, and the crowd was so intense that it left me breathless – a woman came to us and gave us these beautiful, deep-red poppies, some

occupied city centres recently to comment on the capitalist nightmare of the "growth at any cost" scenario, I am in a position of relative privilege ... no sound is possible when we are submerged or drowning.' And Raul Pina Perez from Mexico added: 'For a long time the opinions that are encrypted in the meaning of symbolism of pictures and Conceptual Art has been ignored. Poetical images and metaphysical ideas are important to understand nature and play a good note in the music of the environment. Art is not just a decorative object. The art of the future should and will offer a better way to save our house that according to the young protesters is on fire.' Veteran political artist Peter Kennard has donated work for XR to use and, on the evening of a Massive Attack live show, a Banksy miraculously appeared at Marble Arch. The old guard, it seems, are backing the youth rebellion after all. ■

**Rob La Frenais** is an independent curator.

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