

Haste

The slow politics of climate urgency

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Extinction Rebellion and the future city

Emma Arnold

'Pour ce qui est de l'avenir, il ne s'agit pas de le prévoir, mais de le rendre possible.' 'For that which is to come, it is not a matter of preventing it, but about rendering it possible.' This quotation from Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *Citadelle* (1948) stands alone in the preliminary pages of the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) special report *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (IPCC, 2018: xi). Both ominous and hopeful, the quotation makes a connection between the future and the possible. Read in the context of the catalytic report forecasting impacts of a warming world, it suggests that what the future holds is dependent on the actions we take in the present. This connection between the future and possibility is significant for it hints at the role of imagination and creativity in transforming the present and creating the future. In other words, the future is something we create now. Are we doomed to a dramatically warmed and altered world? Or can we create a different future – multiple futures, even – made possible through our collective imagination and action?

How do climate activists creatively imagine the future? How does climate activism hint at possibilities of a different future? This chapter addresses these questions and explores how the city is performed and transformed in the artistic climate activism of Extinction Rebellion during their Nordic Rebellion in Oslo in August 2021. In the words of academic and politician Rupert Read: Extinction Rebellion is 'an emergency response' (Read, 2020: 1). Extinction Rebellion staged its first major actions in London in late 2018, declaring a climate emergency not long after the IPCC's influential report. In connection with this declaration, the city of London became the site for unprecedented urban climate activism. The group's creativity, urgent tone and unexpected actions across the city captivated the public

imagination, tapping into widespread feelings of hopelessness and a collective desire for meaningful action on climate change.

Introducing Extinction Rebellion

Extinction Rebellion was founded in the United Kingdom in 2018 by Roger Hallam, Gail Bradbrook, Tamsin Omond and Simon Bramwell. The motivations behind Extinction Rebellion are described by Rupert Read: ‘Politics as usual, governments as usual, have let the peoples of the world down in an extreme way: we are on course for eco-driven societal collapse, and we are extinguishing other species very rapidly’ (Read, 2020: 1). Extinction Rebellion has a number of features distinguishing it from other environmental organisations: a distinct de-centralised governing structure, a particular emphasis on civil disobedience, and a unitary and easily recognisable aesthetic. Extinction Rebellion advocates for the use of civil disobedience or non-violent direct action with the goal of instigating government action on the climate crisis. These acts of civil disobedience are often playful, artistic and disruptive. These actions frequently take place in public urban space at symbolic sites. Through their actions, Extinction Rebellion repeatedly make three demands. They demand that governments *tell the truth* about the severity of the climate crisis and declare climate emergencies. They demand that governments *act now* on this emergency and achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2025. They also advocate for going *beyond politics* through setting up citizen assemblies, a form of participatory democracy through which citizens are empowered to make decisions on climate and ecological issues (Extinction Rebellion, 2022).

The Nordic Rebellion

By December 2018, Extinction Rebellion was already in Norway. In April 2019, the Oslo group staged their first major action: *The Green Reaper*. This action was grim and urgent and darkly humorous at moments. The action entailed a funeral procession for all life on Earth through the streets of central Oslo and culminated with speeches, chants, songs and artistic performance in a blockade outside the Ministry of Finance. This was linked to the April International Rebellion though more modest in comparison to events in London, where numerous bridges and public spaces were occupied for 11 days by activists. Extinction Rebellion Norway carried out its second

mass action later in April 2019 with a series of 'die-ins' at strategically chosen sites in Oslo: the iconic Oslo Opera, the main hall of Oslo Central Station and the Oslo City shopping mall. As activists fell to the ground and played dead, clutching signs with dire warnings, the message was clear: climate change kills. Mock funerals, die-ins and other morbid performances continued between April 2019 and August 2021. Throughout 2019, new chapters emerged throughout Norway, a climate camp took place at the Norwegian political festival at Arendal, and Nordic activists joined German rebels at the International Rebellion in Berlin. From 2020 onwards, more local uprisings took place in Oslo, though the COVID-19 pandemic punctuated these rebellions and prevented large collective actions due to public health concerns and restrictions.

More than two years after their first action, Extinction Rebellion Norway staged the *Nordisk Opprør* (Nordic Rebellion) in August 2021 in collaboration with chapters from Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The Nordic Rebellion coincided with the Impossible Rebellion in the United Kingdom and the run-up to national elections in Norway. The Nordic Rebellion took place during a moment of pandemic détente and was promoted as a 'historically large demonstration of civil disobedience'. Taking place in the streets of Oslo between 21 and 29 August 2021, the overarching theme of the week's actions was: 'Our money or our life?' During this week, Extinction Rebellion activists from the Nordic countries collectively made two demands of Norwegian government: 'Keep it in the ground!' and 'Life over profit'. The actions, as many previous actions in Norway have done, addressed the issue of oil dependency and extraction in Norway and the ways in which economic development is perpetually prioritised over environmental concerns. More specifically, the activists demanded 'a rapid downsizing of oil production on the Norwegian continental shelf – and an immediate halt to the exploration for new oil fields' (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021a).

Extinction Rebellion write that 'through artistic and other means, we wish to show everyone how our restless search for more riches leads to devastation: the destruction of fertile soil, forests and animal welfare to make room for highways, runways, windmills, salmon farms, oil fields and deposits of mining waste in fjords' (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021a). These questions and issues frame the Nordic Rebellion actions that were carried out by autonomous groups of activists. Though many were organised independently, their messages converged on their shared vision and demands at various sites throughout Oslo. The following photographs taken during the Nordic Rebellion pick up on these dominant themes and they are presented as a visual essay.

Images of the *Nordic Rebellion*

‘The rebels are coming!’ (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021b)

‘The Nordic uprising is underway!’ (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021b)

23 August 2021

The Nordic Rebellion begins. The first wave of actions begin 23 August 2021. Youth and Red Rebels march from the monolith at Vigeland Park to the Norwegian Parliament. The road is blockaded at Majorstuen. The Ministry of Petroleum and Energy is occupied. Anker Bridge is seized – it is held for the rest of the week. Forty-eight rebels are arrested (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021b).

A yellow vinyl banner marks the southern limit of an occupied space, stretching across the width of Anker Bridge, which connects the centre of Oslo with Grünerløkka. At the northern limit of the bridge, a white banner impedes passage and shouts to passers-by: ‘ACT NOW’. Anker Bridge, sometimes called the Fairy Tale Bridge because of its Art Nouveau design, crosses the Akerselva River that divides Oslo between east and west. For one week, rebels camp here in tents in the middle of the road. ‘La livet vokse – Ikke økonomien’. ‘Let life grow – Not the economy’. On either side of the banner text are illustrations of oak leaves and acorns in the signature Extinction Rebellion art style. Pastel coloured



Figure 4.1 ‘La livet vokse – Ikke økonomien’ – ‘Let life grow – Not the economy’ banner blocks Anker Bridge (23 August 2021).

Photo: Emma Arnold.

chalk softens the pavement with abstract designs, flowers, leaves and the iconic Extinction Rebellion logo. For a moment the banner obscures the people just out of view: playing music, dancing, eating food, hanging out. Just behind another banner, two people sit on the sidewalk. ‘Norwegian oil kills.’ A little white dog stands to the side and watches the scene.

As evening falls, a performer swirls fire. In the foreground, a blue umbrella with a black stencil of a butterfly stands open in a shopping cart. A flag for Animal Rebellion, an affiliated group that advocates for animal rights, hangs blurred and limp in the low light.



Figure 4.2 ‘Norsk olje dreper’ – ‘Norwegian oil kills’ banner on Anker Bridge (23 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.



Figure 4.3 A performer swirls fire on Anker Bridge (23 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.

24 August 2021

Actions alight and burn out all throughout the city. The Ministry of Environment and Climate is occupied, Karl Johan is blockaded. Rebels are removed from spaces throughout Oslo and arrested, and actions fade away from the city streets. Activists sit in Grønland Politistasjon waiting to be processed and freed. Fines for arrest total 429,000 kroner (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021c).

25 August 2021

It is a late summer morning and time for *Sørgemarsjen*. The Sorrow March begins in Oslo's verdant Botanical Gardens in Tøyen. Activists dressed in black with sombre expressions hold dismal messages hand-drawn on fabric and cardboard. A large white banner with silhouettes of animals and humans is held facing outward near the beginning of the long line of activists: 'Dør de – Dør vi'. 'They die – We die'. The Sorrow March is both a present and pre-emptive mourning for the death of animals, of nature. These messages commemorate and grieve the species that disappear each day, that may well vanish in the future. These images of loss are jarring alongside the bright greens and life of the gardens.

The Red Rebels leave the Botanical Gardens, trailing at the end of the Sorrow March. They are an important part of Extinction Rebellion's artistic expression. Like the caryatids whose form they emulate, they are



Figure 4.4 The Sorrow March begins at the Botanical Garden (25 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.

supports. They join actions in silence, moving in slow unison. Their white faces with bright red lips and black eye make-up carry solemn expressions. The red velvet mixed with hanging layers of satin and tulle draped over red flower crowns, all evoke a powerful symbolism. Their red textured garb, exaggeratedly languid movements and doleful faces elicit sorrow and grief, evoking the loss of blood and of life.

The Sorrow March ends at the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Inside the ministry, activists glue themselves to the windows, looking onto



Figure 4.5 Red Rebels leave the Botanical Garden (25 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.



Figure 4.6 Activists demonstrate at the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (25 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.

the blockade outside, onto the mourners from the march and the activists holding banners: 'Natur over næring' – 'Nature over nourishment'.

Outside the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, an artistic performance is begun by a young woman in front of golden doors. Two security guards in navy suits and pale blue surgical masks stand stoically on either side. Pedestrians push past, activists watch from the pavement, employees occasionally squeeze through the protest and make their way inside. Music plays and she slowly pours dark sludge, something akin to concrete or petroleum, over her head. It spills down her face, over her bare skin, over her dress, slowly destroying a landscape painting she holds symbolically in her hands. Later activists toss roses on the destroyed landscape laid at the entrance of the ministry.

26 August 2021

'Hey ho Equitanic! Hey ho Equitanic! Hey ho Equitanic! Heading for disaster ...' Reimagined sea shanties are sung by activists dressed like sailors next to a cardboard boat like the *Titanic*, renamed after the Norwegian state oil company Equinor. Activists from the German civil disobedience movement Ende Gelände together with Extinction Rebellion take action early in the morning at Equinor's headquarters at Fornebu, protesting the company's fracking in Argentina. They drop a large banner from the roof: 'Fracking kills! Out of Vaca Muerta.' Half a million in fines now (Extinction Rebellion Norway, 2021d).



Figure 4.7 Artistic performance outside the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (25 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.

27 August 2021

'Keep IT in the ground!
'Keep it in the ground!
'Keep IT in the ground!
'Keep it in the ground!

'Hva vil vi ha?'
'KLIMAHANDLING!'
'Når vil vi ha det?'
'NÅ!'
'What do we want?'
'CLIMATE JUSTICE!'
'When do we want it?'
'NOW!'

'Hey ho! Take me by the hand. Strong in solidarity we stand. Fight for climate justice, fight for climate justice now.'

A climate march with an unknown destination. It ends in the middle of the intersection of Storgata and Hausmanns gate in central Oslo, just metres away from Anker Bridge. A blockade is established. 'Ban oil over profit.' 'Olja eller livet, Norge?' 'Oil or life, Norway?' 'Ta tak nå! Redd klimaet!' 'Grab it now! Save the climate.' 'Vi vil leve.' 'We want to live.'



Figure 4.8 Activists march along Torgata (27 August 2021).
Photo: Emma Arnold.

Thick black letters on a bright yellow banner held by six hands across an intersection. More banners, more messages, more hands stopping four lanes of traffic on a Friday evening. Cars, buses, trucks are halted in every direction blocked by activists holding signs, activists with arms locked inside steel pipes who lay down in the road, and a panel truck spray-painted with graffiti-style lettering: ‘System Change – Not Climate Change’.



Figure 4.9 ‘Vi vil leve’ – ‘We want to live’ banner held by activists blockading Hausmannsgate (27 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.



Figure 4.10 ‘System change not climate change’ painted in graffiti-style lettering on a truck blocking Hausmannsgate (27 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.

Two activists stand atop the truck, waving Extinction Rebellion flags, brandishing a megaphone. They give speeches and dance on the roof of the truck. Activists below are dancing in the street. Others are locked to the chassis beneath the truck, while some sit cross-legged and glue themselves to the metal sides. Police are present; they confer in groups. Meanwhile, the space that the blockade has created is joyous, made so by live music, dancing, chanting, singing, cheering, speeches.

It is difficult to hear the warnings of the police from their megaphones: their words get lost in drums and trumpets. Hours pass. It is dark and the dancing has stopped. Rebels are removed slowly, one by one, but it takes effort, heavy equipment. Sparks fly as steel pipes are cut from the arms of activists locked on to each other in the road. A fire engine joins police efforts. Police lines expand and push non-arrestables to the outer edges of the blockade. Media get privileged access to the space, some live-streaming the action, while pedestrians are (not always happily) diverted down side streets.

A young woman holds a red rose out into the evening. A sign on her back: 'Eg er livredd fordi 99% av barna i verda e utsatt for minst 1 klimatrussel nå.' 'I am terrified because 99% of the world's children are at risk from at least one climate threat now.'

One week of rebellion, 129 arrested, 2.1 million kroner in fines (Rustad, 2021). Much media coverage, both supportive and critical. Multiple images of the future, in and of the city.



Figure 4.11 An activist holds a single red rose at the police perimeter of a blockade at Hausmannsgate (27 August 2021). Photo: Emma Arnold.

Imagining the present and future city

An empty hourglass suspended in a circular frame. Bold black lines against vivid green, pearl white, neon pink, acid yellow. The circle: the Earth. The empty hourglass: the message that we have run out of time. The Extinction Rebellion symbol has quickly become a powerful climate activist icon; its strong and simple representation is synonymous with a very particular politics. The visual language and aesthetics of Extinction Rebellion are stark and exacting, frequently pairing the dramatic together with bright colours and ludicity. Extinction Rebellion exalts the urgency of the climate crisis, demanding political action through an activist strategy centred on disrupting the order of the city. As the images from the Nordic Rebellion demonstrate, Extinction Rebellion is a movement that is concurrently morbid and hopeful, creative and jarring.

Cultural and artistic expression are important facets of how we imagine and make possible different futures. Veldman (2012) writes that there is a connection between environmental activism and how we imagine the future. Activists frequently act upon a narrative or vision of the future that is dystopian or apocalyptic. Creative actions of climate activists like Extinction Rebellion often take on foreboding tones. These cultural and creative performances of the future may be bleak yet they simultaneously convey hope. When climate activists blockade roads, transform bridges into spaces for play, turn the streets of the city into places of joy and spectacle, activists may unintentionally offer visions of how the city might be reimagined. Paul Chatterton writes that ‘the climate emergency is also a city emergency’ (Extinction Rebellion, 2019: 162).

The city is a symbolic site, one which thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre have described as places of accumulation and flows of capital. In his most renowned essay, Lefebvre writes about the need to ‘redefine the forms, functions and structures of the city’, arguing that there is a ‘fundamental desire’ for citizens to create moments in the city that are playful, creative and operate apart from the dominant role of cities as sites of commerce, consumption and labour (Lefebvre, 2010: 147). Extinction Rebellion address the symbolic and real power of cities frequently. Their arguments for carrying out actions in capital cities like Oslo are specifically about disrupting these flows of capital and about targeting the spaces and places where decisions are being made. During the Nordic Rebellion in Oslo, it was frequently government departments, the Norwegian Parliament and companies like Equinor that were targeted.

What is the future that Extinction Rebellion imagines? Pairing contradictory aesthetics, Extinction Rebellion plays with utopia and dystopia, simultaneously evoking very different possible futures through their activism. These contrasting futures are inherent to the movement's climate politics. Indeed, the novelty of this movement is in successfully balancing potential dystopian futures with hopeful alternate visions. Dystopian futures emerge through actions that engage with death and extinction. Die-ins, artistic funeral processions and other performances remind the spectator of the dire consequences of unchecked climate change. While the tones are morose, they are often paired with strong, playful graphics: brightly coloured flags and banners emblazoned with bold black text and stencil graphics of animals and plants.

Hopeful visions also emerge in multiple ways. The political organisation and ambitions of the movement are themselves a vision of how a more 'utopian' society might function: a non-hierarchical, non-violent, transparent, equitable participatory democracy built on a foundation of a resilient and regenerative culture. The way that Extinction Rebellion takes space in the city is similarly hopeful. Disrupting the city through non-violent direct action, activists transform spaces into the possible. The actions of Extinction Rebellion weigh multiple futures against each other. On the one hand, they imagine a dystopian future where all species are extinct, ravaged by humanity's greed and unbridled economic growth. Yet their actions suggest that this catastrophic future is not inevitable. It is not yet written. Acting now is how another future may be made possible. It is a future free from oil dependence, in which the rebellion against extinction is successful. It is a future where life is elevated above profit. Disrupting the flow and rhythm of the city and altering the logics of space, Extinction Rebellion offers a glimpse of a different path, showing what the future city and life could be.

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