

‘Look at the happy bear here!’ The use of activism in Extinction Rebellion Sweden¹

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Abstract

The article describes and analyses how the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) Sweden makes use of art as part of nonviolent direct actions, a form of action which often is referred to as activism. The article is based on direct observations of actions, documented online chats, interviews with participants, and content analysis of films, photographs and social media posts. The activist actions were performed in Stockholm in 2020-2022. The interviews were made in the autumn 2022. The first part of the article is descriptive, presenting a series of activist actions performed by the XR group. There is also a critical and historical discussion of politically engaged art and the use of art in activism. The second part of the article consists of a thematic analysis of the interview material. The article argues that activism is important both as a means of communication and for the internal culture in the activist group. As a form of meaning-making, artistic creation challenges the ready-made framing of political issues. The activist performance is a form of place-making, temporarily transforming the meaning of public space, setting the stage for a carnivalesque where climate activists can appear as Fossil Fuel Industry executives, openly revealing disinformation and Greenwashing campaigns. Activist action constitutes a form of aesthetics of resistance, challenging hegemonic ideological representation. Many of the activist actions performed by the XR group were satirical, where humour plays an important part. Humour is also important in other ways, to keep up the spirit and engagement of the activists, and to defuse possible tension with bystanders and representatives of law enforcement.

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Introduction: In media res

In the afternoon of 21 September 2020, a group of climate activists performed a peaceful direct action at the head office of the Swedish oil company Preem in Stockholm. The action had the form of a theatrical performance, a make-believe interview between a journalist from Extinction Rebellion TV and the CEO of Preem. The action took place both in the public area of the office building and in the reception inside the company office space. It was documented through photography, film as well as live-streamed on Facebook (XR SWE 2020, September 21).² The activist-actors were members of Extinction Rebellion (XR) Stockholm. The following text is a translation of the beginning of the transcript.

XR Journalist: *Welcome to our live broadcast. Here we are, Extinction Rebellion TV, broadcasting from Preem's head office. And we are very happy that we today have been given the opportunity to meet Preem's CEO, Sam Satan.*

Preem CEO: *Yes, that's right.*

XR Journalist: *And it's the case that right now you are facing a major expansion of Preemraff outside Lysekil?*

Preem CEO: *Yes, this is true. There has been a lot of debate and writing about it and so on.*

XR Journalist: *The entire environmental movement is engaged in protests and they claim that this is a decisive matter of fate for the climate. Because of this expansion, you have the opportunity to become Sweden's largest carbon dioxide emitter. From a third place to a contested first place. How does it feel?*

Preem CEO: *Yes, there are mixed feelings, of course. But this requires a qualification. We will at the same time become one of Europe's absolute cleanest producers of oil products, and fuel for ships and also, by extension, for cars, since it is about biofuel in the long term. So we're not really that worried about the future, in that way.*

XR Journalist: *So you mean that the future benefits from your expansion?*

Preem CEO: *Well, benefits and benefits. We're all a little bit stuck in the crude already, so to speak, with a series of different problems that have arisen here and there around the world and we have this small task, so to speak, to try to solve the climate crisis—to 'solve' the climate crisis—and between us, we know that*

² The action is also described in a post on Facebook, see XR SWE (2020, September 27).

it's over, right? We must prioritize what is lucrative in the short term if we are to have a functioning society at all.

XR Journalist: *But how will it go with the Paris Agreement if the expansion goes through?*

Preem CEO: *Well, I don't think that many people believe in the Paris Agreement that much at all. It is from the beginning a paper product and signed to ensure that various interest groups get their way and are satisfied and happy and so on, and there's probably nobody who believes that it is something that will go through and so on. This is what I think, between us.*

At the time, Preem had advanced plans of enlarging its oil refinery in Lysekil outside Gothenburg, commonly referred to as 'Preemraff'. The company had applied for the enlargement already in 2016, and in 2018 the application had been approved by the Environmental Court in Vänersborg (Miljödömsstolen vid Vänersborg tingsrätt, 2018). Several environmental organisations had appealed the decision, and the case was taken up by the Swedish Environmental Court of Appeals (Miljööverdomstolen). In June 2020, the court decided that there were no legal objections for the enlargement, disregarding that it would double the emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) to 3.4 million tons, which do not include the emissions from burning the fossil fuels (scope 3 emissions) (Mark- och miljööverdomstolen vid Svea Hovrätt, 2020; Svea Hovrätt, 2020; see also Cantwell, 2020; Dagens Nyheter, 2020). However, the Swedish government—which at the time consisted of a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party (Miljöpartiet)—had previously declared they would have the final say in the matter (Svenska Dagbladet, 2019). During the whole process, there had been a concerted campaign by several environmental groups protesting the plans to enlarge the refinery (Naturskyddsföreningen, 2021; Lönnqvist Petersson, 2021). The XR action at Preem's head office was part of these protests.

The transcript from the action continues:

XR Journalist: *In your commercials you also claim that you are a sustainable company. What do you mean by this?*

Preem CEO: *I must say it has been a very successful advertising campaign that we have run. In other words, we own the entire Vasaloppet [an annual long distance cross-country ski race], you could say, so indirectly, and we've had Gunde Swan [a legendary Swedish ski champion] on our side and talked a lot about pine oil. Everyone who is familiar with the matter knows that this is*

really just a spectacle, right? We are fully aware that our core business is to extract fossil fuels and burn them, and that is what the Swedish people want, that is what everyone wants. So we have been very successful in our marketing I must say. People's trust in our business has increased enormously because of our close connexion with Vasaloppet, for example. We think it's very nice.

XR Journalist: *You also claim that in the future it will be possible to fly climate-friendly thanks to your pine oil. Can you elaborate on that, how do you use pine oil?*

Preem CEO: *There are different types of biofuel. Right now we've been talking about pine oil because that's what sells. You could say that we wouldn't have many pine cones and pine trees left in the forests if we were to get aviation to run solely on biofuel. So this is something we use in our marketing to bring in the various interest groups that might have some input on this. So it's... and it's been very successful, people trust us.*

XR Journalist: *So you mean you've made money from your eco-friendly profile?*

Preem CEO: *Absolutely. It is extremely lucrative to have a green communication. Our communication department is very expensive. You see our office here is elegant and we like to have a beautiful façade, it is very important to us as a player in the oil industry.*

The activist group entering the office building was not large, eight people. The action took place during the Covid 19 pandemic, and there was an official regulation that 'crowds' larger than eight people were not allowed. For an unknowing bystander, and the employees at Preem, it was not obvious that they were activists. In this way the action was similar to what Augusto Boal has called 'invisible theatre' (Boal, 2019, 122-126), a form of theatrical performance enacted in a place where people would not normally expect to see one. The actors disguise the fact that it is a performance, leading spectators to view it as a real, unstaged event. In the XR action at Preem, one person appeared to be a journalist, having a microphone and using a smartphone to make a live-stream video; two people were dressed in grey suits (the male 'CEO' and his female assistant); one person was wearing orange overalls, carrying cleaning utensils; there were two photographers and one cameraperson; and there was one person responsible for contact with both Preem and the police. The performance was simple: the XR journalist was making an interview with the male person dressed in a suit, who was impersonating the CEO of Preem; the man in orange overalls was performing a strange stunt of cleaning up 'oil spills' (consisting of fake oil),

but in the process made an even greater mess by using liquid green soap (symbolising greenwashing).



Artist action at Preem Head Office in Stadshagen, Stockholm, September 21, 2020. (Flickr, Extinction Rebellion Sverige)

Initially, the action took place on the public part of the 7th floor of the building, on the landing outside the elevator, but also inside the elevator. At some point, three of the activists entered the reception area of Preem's office and continued the interview there. They had anticipated that at this point the action would have been interrupted. But for unclear reasons—perhaps because the receptionist did not understand what was going on, believing perhaps that it was a real interview, and in any case the acting did not disturb anybody—they could continue. On the sidewalk outside the entrance to the office building, there was a separate peaceful action taking place. Here a small group of activists, again less than eight people, had placed a model of an oil rig directly outside the entrance. Two activists had attached themselves to the oil rig with bicycle locks, others were holding signs. Inside, the make-believe interview continued.

XR Journalist: Also, from what I understand, you can use this successful, as you call it, this strategy also when it comes to...

Preem CEO: [Interrupts] *Look at the happy bear here* [points to Preem's polar bear logo on the glass door of the office]

XR Journalist: ... *gasoline fuel as you do with pine oil?*

Preem CEO: *Yes, what do you mean?*

XR Journalist: *That with a little pine oil in the tank, you can drive with a clear conscience.*

Preem CEO: [Singing] *With a little sugar at the bottom, the medicine goes down.* [Laughs] *It's something we usually bring to our company parties. After all, it's about selling the black gold in as nice a way as possible, and there the pine oil is very important to us in order to appear in a slightly better light.*

XR Journalist: *I am a little surprised that we get such sincere answers from you today.*

Preem CEO: [acting surprised and confused] *This is off the record, isn't it? You haven't, we haven't started the interview yet have we?*

XR Journalist: *Yes, yes, absolutely, we've started, this is going out on a live-stream.*

At this point, the activist-actor impersonating Preem's CEO appears confused and calls on his assistant to help him out. If this had been a real situation, in the sense of a real CEO of an oil company, his admissions in the interview would have amounted to a gaffe, an unintentional act or remark causing embarrassment to its originator. Most gaffes are indeed unintentional, that is, the person accidentally says something they do not mean, they say something they think or believe but would not want to say openly (like a Freudian slip of the tongue), or because they speak the truth but address the wrong audience. While gaffes typically are perceived as unintentional mistakes, experienced politicians and policy makers can intentionally make a gaffe in order to say what they should not say publicly. Although semantically the intentional gaffe is an oxymoron, its perlocutionary force (Austin, 1962, 101)³ can be remarkable in that it is cloaked as the 'naked truth'. In this theatre action, the gaffe is fake in a different fashion. Although the statements may be true enough, the person speaking is not really who he pretends to be. Thus, it

³ 'Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them; [...]. We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act or a perlocution' (Austin, 1962, 101).

is not the speech act—the gaffe—that is feigned, but the person speaking. Similarly, the embarrassment is both true—in character—and feigned—produced by an actor.

These things are not the only ones that are not what they seem to be. The action takes place at Preem's head office in Stockholm, which is real enough, but during the action event, it is transformed into a stage, which in turn transforms the place, albeit only momentarily. That is, whereas Preem's office space, which is designed in a way to communicate green values—using natural materials like wood, and the prominent polar bear logo—is a space of untruth, more specifically of greenwashing, through the theatre action it becomes a place of truth. In this way, the action-event has the character of a *détournement* of place, a creative disfigurement of a text, image or film (Debord & Wolman, 1956). This way of using a physical space to stage a performance or a piece of theatre can be contrasted with Peter Brook's notion of the theatre as an 'empty space' (Brook, 1996).⁴ That is, whereas the stage in a theatre in a certain way is a space that can be transformed into any place or even no place, the Preem head office is not an empty space. Nor does the action in any way empty the space of meaning, but rather enacts a superimposition and an intensification of meaning. The sleek 'green' design of the office space still speaks of green values, but in a multi-layered and more complex way.

On 28 September 2020, exactly one week after the action at their head office, Preem unexpectedly announced that they would withdraw the application for an enlargement of their refinery in Lysekil, and instead would submit a new one for the production of bio-fuels (Preem, 2020; SVT, 2020). Many people suspected the decision was the result of some kind of agreement with the government, where the Green party was hard pressed to block the enlargement. Nevertheless, for the environmental movement in Sweden, the news was perceived as a victory. On the following day, 29 September, the same activist group made a new appearance at Preem's head office. This time they handed over a diploma complimenting the actions of the company (XR SWE 2020, October 3). The return to the scene not only constituted a sequel to the first action, but also the beginning of a series of activist actions, which is discussed below.

⁴ In all fairness, Brook uses the term ironically, arguing that the theatre stage is far from as 'empty' as one may imagine. Theatre, as symbolic and artistic practice, is full of conventions, which Brook criticizes in his book.

Artivism

This kind of nonviolent direct action that uses art—here more specifically theatrical performance—is often labelled ‘artivism’, a portmanteau of art + activism. Broadly defined, the term refers to socially-engaged artistic practices that include modes of political activism, the basic idea being to advance a political or social agenda by means of art (Lemoine & Ouardi, 2010; Selmin, 2015; Nossel, 2016; Weij, 2021). Although the term ‘artivism’ appears to be of fairly recent origin, the phenomenon itself is not new. There was a surge of activist art during the period 1960-1990 (Felshin, 1995; Perini, 2010). For the Twentieth Century, one can think of resistance songs, street art and poster art, political films and avant-garde theatre (Brecht, Artaud, Weiss), activist novels—what Jean-Paul Sartre called *littérature engagée* (Sartre, 1948)—and artists articulating protest in painting (e.g. Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, 1937). Depending on how one understands and defines art and activism, and their articulation, one can probably trace the phenomenon further back in history.

It is sometimes argued that artivism, like civil disobedience, should be ‘disturbing’. But not all direct actions—legal or not—are disturbing or uncivil, and the same would be the case of artist actions. At the same time, the ‘disturbing’ element in artivism can also be aesthetic, in that art often is challenging and upsetting. One can recall the fundamental idea in Viktor Shklovsky’s essay ‘Art as Device’ (2015), that art uses ‘defamiliarization’ (*ostranenie*) to put the mind in a state of radical unpreparedness and in this way make us see and hear things in new and different ways. The artist action can create enigmatic situations demanding of the onlooker to figure out ‘what is going on?’ (Duncombe, 2016; Adorno, 1993, 182-186).⁵ As we have seen, artivism also aims at a temporary transformation of the place, creating a new atmosphere and elevating it into a higher emotional quality (Debord, 2006, 33). Many artist actions have the form of pranks—practical jokes or mischievous acts—where the activists impersonate or even

⁵ Cf. e.g.: ‘Alle Kunstwerke, und Kunst insgesamt, sind Rätsel [...]. Daß Kunstwerk etwas sagen und mit dem gleichen Atemzug es verbergen, nennt den Rätselcharakter unterm Aspekt der Sprache. [...] Je besser man ein Kunstwerk versteht, desto mehr mag es nach einer Dimension sich enträtseln, desto weniger jedoch klärt es über sein konstitutiv Rätselhaftes auf’ (Adorno, 1993, 182 & 184). But for Adorno, that the artwork is ‘constitutionally enigmatic’ means that ‘Kunstwerke, die der Betrachtung und dem Gedanken ohne Rest aufgehen, sind keine’ (Adorno, 1993, 184).

pretend to be representatives of the institution they criticise. It has been argued that this form of 'appropriation' is more effective than direct actions that attempt to disrupt or sabotage operations or businesses (Harold, 2004). The non-initiated onlooker may indeed not know what is going on, but cues such as dress, make-up, acting or singing indicate that something out-of-the-ordinary is happening. The cues can be very simple, as when activists lie down on the ground in a 'die-in'. Humour and irony are often used as artistic devices (Hart, 2007; Wettergren, 2009; Sørensen, 2016), as in the two actions at Preem described above.

In theory if not always in practice, activism can be distinguished both from the aesthetisation of politics and the use of art for political purposes (the politisation of art) (Benjamin, 1989, 384), in that it is not associated with a political party or an ideology. In activism, artists and activists make artworks either as an important part of an action or to design the action itself (Poch & Poch, 2018). Although the kind of activism that is associated with activism typically takes place outside art galleries and museums, i.e. outside the sanitized part of the artworld referred to as 'the white cube' (O'Doherty, 1986), there is also a fair amount of activism taking place in gallery space (Hannum & Pyun, 2023). However, these distinctions are not always or necessarily clear-cut or absolute. For instance, one could mention the activist group Guerrilla Girls, in which feminist artists fight sexism and racism within the art world, targeting unbalanced gender representation in art institutions (Hess, 1995; Brockes, 2015); and so-called 'relational aesthetics' puts in question the artwork as an aesthetic object (Bourriaud, 1998). Another activist group is BP or not BP, which performs activist actions at museums that receive funding from the fossil fuel industry (Hyperallergic, 2023). From an aesthetic point of view, activism constitutes a challenge to the institutional theory of art (Danto, 1964; Dickie, 1974; see also introduction to Felshin, 1995). That is, according to the institutional theory of art, art is defined—performatively, but also somewhat tautologically—by what is viewed as art by the 'artworld' (artists, art galleries, curators, museums, art critics, art professors, etc). However, in contrast to the Situationist International, activism is not necessarily an attack on art as an institution. At the same time, one should note that many artists, writers as well as critics avoid contact or contamination with activism, there being a prejudice that 'the worst artists are the most engaged' (Sartre, 1948, 11; see also Adorno, 1974).

The academic research on activism can roughly be divided into studies focusing on activism as a form of art (typically conducted from the perspective of Art and Aesthetics); and studies focusing on activism as a form of activism (in Cultural studies, Media studies, Sociology, Politics or Peace and Conflict Studies) (Danko, 2018). In this essay, activism is studied as a meaning-making practice, combining an aesthetic perspective with a semiotic one (e.g. Eco, 1973; Mathieu-Castellani, 1994; Pavis, 1996; Pavis, 2000; Dahlberg, 2006).

Activism has been a central element in XR activism from the start, from the design of its graphic profile, the use of images and props in actions, costumes, to the choreography of staged protests (such as sit-ins, die-ins, teach-ins). On the XR UK website there is a page for XR Art Group, whose purpose is to 'help[...] Extinction Rebellion look fantastically rebellious' (XR Art Group, no date). The page provides extensive art and design resources that are freely available to XR activists. There are also several XR groups—or XR affiliated groups—that have activism as primary objective, such as Letters to the Earth (Letters to the Earth, no date), the Red Rebel Brigade (Red Rebel Brigade, no date) and XR Art Blockers (XR Art Blockers, no date; #bodypolitic, no date).

In Sweden, many direct actions performed by XR have included activist elements, such as die-ins in shopping malls and in front of the National parliament, and some actions have had an overarching choreography—for instance as a funeral march. Like many actions before, during and after the pandemic, activist actions are mediated in different ways, primarily by video live-stream and photographs posted on social media, which is important for the construction of meaning. Not only do mediated direct actions reach a larger audience, but the viewers on social media are attuned to the message in ways that occasional bystanders may not be. On social media it is also possible to provide a commentary and voice-over that explains what is going on.

Preem is not the only Swedish oil company to have been targeted by XR activist actions. On 6 November, 2020, the same group staged an action at the auction house Bukowski's in Stockholm, which at the time was owned by the Lundin family, the principal owners of Lundin Energy, formerly Lundin Oil (Wolodarski, 2022). The action picked up on the goods on sale, expensive watches, and the activists produced ticking sounds and ringing alarm bells to represent the urgency to act; they read aloud a poem highlighting the need

to act now. The activists also placed a Dali-like melting clock on top of one of the displays. Although the action was carefully thought through it did not turn out well: bystanders did not understand the meaning of the ticking sounds and alarm bells, they did not understand the poem, and, worse still, security guards found the situation threatening and over-reacted, not only demanding the activists to leave but using physical violence to take them outside, even destroying activist camera equipment.



Artist action at Bukowski's, Stockholm, June 24, 2021
(Flickr, Extinction Rebellion Sverige)

The following summer, on June 24, 2021, the auction house Bukowski's was again targeted by an activist action, this time in a way that could not be understood as threatening. A small group of summer-dressed activists entered the premises, pretending to belong to the Lundin family, bringing an artwork they wanted to have evaluated. The artwork was a parody of Carl Johan De Geer's screen print *Desecrate the Flag* (*Skända flaggan*, 1967), which had at some point been auctioned by Bukowski's (Bukowskis, no date). The parody was entitled *Desecrate the Arctic* (*Skända arktis*), referring to the destruction of sensitive arctic habitats through the exploration and extraction of oil.⁶ A post on Facebook described the action in this way:

⁶ The activist had contacted the artist Carl Johan De Geer, who had approved

Today, the day before Midsummer Eve, a small group of brightly dressed Midsummer celebrants with flower wreaths in their hair marched from the King's Garden in Stockholm to Bukowski's auction house at Berzelii Park. They came from Lundin Energy, which is also owned by Bukowski's owners, the Lundin family.

At the head of the group walked Mr. and Mrs. Lundin, carrying a strange painting. They had received the painting from a climate activist who came to them. The Lundins were delighted by the gift and had decided to have it appraised at Bukowski's. They soon realized that the painting was a kind of paraphrase [sic] of Carl Johan De Geer's famous painting *Desecrate the Flag* from the 1960s—a painting that is in Bukowski's collections. But on this version it read instead:

DESECRATE THE ARCTIC

VANDALIZE THE WORLD

FAIL THE GRANDCHILDREN

BE CRIMINAL

LUNDIN

The Lundin couple went into the reception area happily, if somewhat confused by the painting's message, and asked to have the work appraised—both artistically and ethically.

Unfortunately, the appraisers were not as enthusiastic about the work and asked the couple to go out. When the spouses did not want to leave and went into the exhibition hall to try to find an appraiser, the personnel even threatened calling the police. Mr. and Mrs. Lundin found this quite unpleasant, so they decided to leave.

But on the way, the real message of the painting began to dawn on Mr. Lundin and he collapsed in pain over the company's dirty oil drilling in the Arctic. But then his wife came up with good counsel:

both the parody and the action.

‘We can use GREENWASH!’ she exclaimed and this immediately put Mr. Lundin in a better mood.

With renewed joy, they went out into the street where they were met by the other midsummer celebrants as well as Lundin Energy’s CEO, who gave a tribute speech to the company and presented the company’s Greenwash School.

More about the events outside the auction house in the next post!

Happy green-washed midsummer! (XR SWE, 2021, June 24)⁷

The post on Facebook was followed by a disclaimer describing the action as ‘an artistic performance by Extinction Rebellion Stockholm with the aim of exposing Lundin Energy’s greenwashing and expanding oil extraction in the Norwegian Arctic’ (XR SWE 2021, June 24). The Facebook post is illustrated with a series of photographs where one can see activists perform the actions described in the text above.

In this action, the non-comprehension and confusion of the personnel at the auction house were incorporated in the story, making the appraisers involuntary actors and participants in the action. It can be argued that the real impact of this and many other activist actions happen online, in social media, where they find a substantial and appreciative audience, and also that the actions, as events, take place as much—if not more—online as in the real world. To better relay the idea, one can compare with the concept ‘media event’, ceremonial events that are live broadcast and gather a large segment of the population, such as royal weddings or funerals (Katz & Dayan, 1992). Although this activist action did not gather a very large media audience, it was nevertheless conceived and designed for the purpose of media dissemination. As a form of minor media event, these activist actions make use of existing formats such as the interview, award ceremony, assessment, and celebration. All the actions have included impersonations, where activists dress up and pretend to be members of the oil industry.

It is of course possible that the action at Bukowski’s had a real impact on the company, in that it highlighted the connexion between the Lundin

⁷ This Facebook post was followed by another the next day, describing in more detail what happened outside Bukowski’s, see XR SWE (2021, June 25). The ‘Greenwash School’ was inspired by the comic strip ‘Greenwashskolan!’ (Jordens vänner, 2021).

family and the activities of Lundin Energy in the arctic. In Swedish art history, De Geer's print *Desecrate the Flag* has an iconic status, and it is quite unique in having had an impact on Swedish legislation (Dagens Nyheter, 2021).⁸ Hence, one can imagine the internal discussions at Bukowski's after the action, although these may not have influenced the decision to sell off the auction house in 2022 (Wolodarski, 2022).

A few months later, on 11 August (2021), XR Stockholm organised 'Lundin's Greenwash Party', beginning in Berzelii Park outside Bukowski's and then continuing in nearby King's Garden. There, in the large rectangular Forum Pond, the activists coloured the water green, and then proceeded to have a pool party, celebrating Lundin's successful marketing of 'carbon free oil' (Reuters, 2021). In this action, apart from the actors, there were also many other XR activists present, who were tasked with explaining to on-lookers what was going on, distributing leaflets, as well as describing the reasons for exposing greenwashing by the fossil fuel industry. In contrast to the previous activist actions, the activist-actors participating in the pool party had no script other than engaging in a celebration.

The same XR group has also targeted the Norwegian Embassy in Stockholm, protesting against the continuing and expanding oil industry in the North Sea. On the day before New Year's Eve 2020, they organised a small party to celebrate the decision to give 13 oil companies permission to drill for oil in the Arctic (XR SWE, 2021, January 1). A couple of

⁸ Carl Johan De Geer's screen print *Desecrate the Flag* depicts a burning Swedish flag. On the left side it says, in large blue letters, 'Desecrate the flag', 'Refuse arms'; and, slightly smaller in yellow letters, 'Betray the motherland', 'Be non-national'. In the middle of the yellow cross on the flag it is written 'KUKEN', in red. The artwork is the most well-known of a series of three works the artist made in 1967 to promote the refusal to do military service and to create public opinion against the US bombings of Vietnam. The series were exhibited in an art gallery in Stockholm in April 1967. The public prosecutor considered the artworks to be 'inflammatory' and ordered them to be seized. The artist was sentenced to pay a fine for incitement and desecration of Swedish and foreign national symbols. The seized artworks were subsequently burned by the police. This was one of the few times during the 20th century that the Swedish state, with reference to the law, destroyed an artist's work. This event subsequently led to a change of Swedish legislation, and since 1983 it is permitted by law to burn, tear apart or in other ways desecrate the Swedish flag.

months later, on 1 March, 2021, they organised another action outside the Norwegian Embassy, ironically pitching the idea of cutting off Norway's highest mountain (Galdhøpiggen) in order to create a golf course (XR SWE, 2021, March 2). It could also be mentioned that there are several other XR groups in Sweden that have used activism both as part/s of an action and to design actions in their entirety. The reason for me to focus on the activist actions performed by XR Stockholm is because this is where I live and am active.



Artist action in the King's Garden (Kungsträdgården), Stockholm, August 11, 2021 (Flickr, Extinction Rebellion Sverige)

Method

This study of activism performed by activists in XR Stockholm is based on field studies, participatory observations, and recorded interviews with activists. I have had access to online chats used to plan some of the actions. I have used recorded videos—primarily live-stream videos—of the actions uploaded on the internet; photographs posted on social media in connexion with the actions together with short texts describing the actions; as well as photographs uploaded on the XR Sweden Flickr account. The study is informed by theories and practices of performance (Schechner, 2003), in particular theatre as a medium of resistance (Brecht, Boal, Weiss) and the use

of political satire. Since the activists make extensive use of social media as a medium to disseminate activist actions, this also is part of the practical and conceptual framing of the study (Treré, 2019). The study of activism in XR is part of a larger project on climate activism in Sweden and Western Europe (see e.g. Dahlberg, 2023). In the remainder of this article, the interview material is foregrounded.

For this study five activists who regularly participate in activist actions have been interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2022. I had met them on numerous occasions previously, at XR meetings and actions, so we were to a certain extent familiar with each other; at the same time, there was no knowledge of each other's private life. The activists have quite different professional backgrounds. One is an opera singer and actor; another is a painter and conceptual artist; one is a natural science teacher at an adult education centre (*folkhögskola*) with extensive experience in amateur theatre; another is a university lecturer; and one is a communicator and social activist with academic degrees in journalism, rhetoric and art history. Three of them are women, two are men. The majority of the interviewees are middle aged.

The five participants had quite different experience of activism, art and activist art. The singer-actor has a broad and professional relationship to art, he has been active in various climate organisations since 2016. The painter-artist likewise has a professional relationship to art, which she also describes as profoundly personal. Before becoming active in the climate movement, she had made use of art to protest against the war in Iraq and also to commemorate the massacre at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. She has been a key person in organising the Red Rebel Brigade in Sweden. The natural science teacher's relation to art is different, but also extensive. His experience as a teacher is valuable for speaking in public and in teach-ins as well as in explaining physical phenomena. The university lecturer says her previous experience of performing arts was limited to singing. The communicator-social activist has both a theoretical and practical knowledge of written and oral communication, including knowledge of how to think strategically to get the message across to different publics. She also has a personal interest in art. The characterisation above that these five activists are members of a group needs to be qualified. As in all activist contexts, the level and intensity of engagement vary over time, and people come and go. These five people are part of a larger group of people involved in organising and performing actions, both in XR and other climate organisations. For any

particular action, other people from this larger group may participate both in the planning and execution. More details of how the group is organised appear below.

In analysing the interview material, a number of themes emerged. Obviously, several of these themes originated in questions posed by the researcher, hence it is not claimed that the themes are unbiased or objective. The themes are: conceiving and planning; preparing and rehearsing; executing and performing; place; media and mediation; debriefing and assessment; reactions and reception; and art as a device in activism. I use these themes as subheadings to organise the presentation and analysis of the interviews. The article ends with a concluding discussion.

Conceiving & planning

When it comes to planning actions, there emerged strikingly different views. One interviewee said that ‘some actions one perhaps invents together [...]’. And then she continued:

But other actions that I have participated in have perhaps been based on that I have an idea of what one could do artistically. Then you almost need to have like a written script; one thinks very much that this should become a film, which will be spread. You have to be able to have some knowledge about and control over how the action develops; what we will say to each other and what we will answer each other; that we have an inkling about it. But every time we have of course improvised based on that script, because we cannot know how it will go and how it will be received at that particular moment. When you have *this*, then I feel it can become a good movie out of it. And also those who are filming need to know what will happen, what it is that they should cover.

The person also added that ‘in the planning, people can contribute’; but ‘it begins with me having a clear idea, to which I get feedback. Then it’s not necessary with these long physical meetings. It’s democratic but in another way, even if it has not been created together.’ That is, she would write the script herself, and then get feedback on it from members of the group. She described how they have used an online chat to discuss and develop proposed action scripts. She said she felt that these online discussions, in which everyone could participate, made the planning inclusive, even if she was the main author of the script.

Others described the conception of an action differently: that somebody had an idea, typically triggered by some recent event, to which others then responded. This could happen in a physical meeting or a meeting online. Later, when the group had produced a clear idea, they would make an invitation for others to join in order to develop the idea further and perhaps also to write a script. All participants who had been part of planning expressed a concern that the process should be democratic and inclusive, although this could happen in different ways. One activist clearly favoured the more open, participatory approach, but had also participated in planning processes where one person had conceived the action and written a script and he said that this had 'worked out really well also'. It seems that in the group there is an openness to work in different ways, even if they have individual preferences.

Regarding the order of things, in the sense of 'how one goes about planning' an action, one activist stated 'that there is no absolute order in doing things.' He added:

But one thing that comes at the beginning is sort of what do we want to do, what problem do we want to highlight. For example, Norway is handing out even more licenses to oil companies to continue looking for even more oil wells in the Arctic and the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea and all that. So that's the problem: That Norway continues to hand out oil licenses.

A recurrent feature in many of their artistic actions is the use of humour and satire. This came up in different ways during the interviews. One interviewee describes that humour 'was there from the beginning in this Preem action, [...] we would use humour in order to make fun of their greenwash, which we think is a joke.'⁹ The stated objective is to 'make everybody else see that it is a joke.' Another activist concurred: 'This is of course incredible funny.' She added:

It doesn't reach a broad public audience, but foremost other activists.

But this has a value also. Even if we do not reach out with this, we do it

⁹ Preem has received the award 'The Swedish Greenwash Prize' in 2019 (Röhne, 2019). Their advertising campaigns have been criticized many times in media (e.g. Wronski, 2020) and the Swedish Public Consumer Agency (Konsumentverket) has threatened to take legal action unless they cease (Thunborg, 2020).

for our fellow rebels, our friends. It is also enormously important that we inspire, give power to us. We need it, for our culture.

A third activist commented on the importance of humour:

An important thing is that we ourselves shall think that it is fun, in order to keep it up. People who stand with signs somewhere, it is really boring to look at. We must do things that are more fun than that. To make something unexpected happen is also a way to communicate more.

Extending the perspective, one activist argued that contemporary climate activism is part of a larger cultural change, in which art is a necessary component, and that it is necessary to combine seriousness and humour. She said:

What we are doing is a paradigm shift, it is a culture change. I would say a revolution in how we think, in how we are, in how we behave, and so on. In this revolution, we need art, we need artistic expression. We need both seriousness and humour, we need to both laugh and cry. So we need satire.

This comment also summarises a perception of many climate activists, both that society is going through a radical system change, a transition to a more sustainable society, and that the change is cultural as much as it is economic and political. The struggle for this change is serious, because the stakes are so high, but it also needs humour. As an artistic form, satire combines the two, using ridicule and laughter as means to undermine and attack one's political opponents—but laughter also goes in the other direction, as a levelling and inclusive force.¹⁰ It is interesting, and perhaps revealing, that in

¹⁰ Here one could perhaps bring up a pithy anecdote used by Theodor Adorno, in his critique of 'engaged' art, as an example of how satire can work in several directions at the same time. According to the story, Picasso was visited in his studio by an officer of the German occupation forces. The latter, pointing to *Guernica*, asked 'Did you do that?' To which Picasso reputedly answered, 'No, you did' (Adorno, 1974). Adorno uses this story to repudiate those who accuse artists of being responsible for what they are revolting against. The irony is that Adorno uses this story in a critique of engaged art, of which *Guernica* is a prominent example. That is, although the point of the story, from Adorno's point of view, is those who criticise artists who, like Picasso, depict the horrors of war, this critique also turns on his own critique of Brecht and other artists

these comments different dimensions of humour seem to connect. That is, humour is perceived as an important part of working together; as a necessary complement to the seriousness of the issue; and as a means to communicate better with the public.

Another form of XR activist action, in which humour appears to be completely absent, is the one performed by the Red Rebel Brigade. These actions are most often part of another action, like a support action. Actions by the Red Rebels are scripted very differently than the ones described above. The activists are dressed in red garments reaching from head to feet, and wear white make-up and black eyeliner. They perform as a group, moving demonstratively slowly in a procession. They do not say anything, but use their arms and bodies to make gestures, moving very slowly, expressing emotions like grief and mourning. In the urban landscape, the slow procession and bodily gestures create a choreographic vector and generate attention. A key feature in the Red Rebels is that the activist-performers are disciplined in their movements and that they are attuned to each other. One activist described it like this: 'We move and feel everything in unison, this is what is important.' For this to function, the group needs to meet regularly.

Preparing & rehearsal

Part of the preparation for an action is to do research around the 'problem', to investigate the issue/s one wants to highlight. This information 'is used in the press release, but also in the design of the action. [...] We also use facts in the scene that we act. And the same thing in social media.' Many actions include handing over a letter to the targeted institution or company, stating both facts and demands. Another important element is to scout the scene, which is often done repeatedly. This is crucial so that they can plan and coordinate the action, decide where they shall stand and how they shall move. In case there is an interference by the police, they need to have a place to which to move. They also need to decide on costumes and props, which may need to be procured or manufactured.

for producing 'bad art' based on 'bad politics'. Now, it is not unthinkable that Adorno, intentionally—as a feigned gaffe—uses this story as form of auto-critique, as a way to acknowledge the limits of his own critique. But regardless, the story allows the reader to laugh both with Picasso and Adorno, as well at Adorno.

The activist actions were also carefully prepared in that they had been discussed and developed in many meetings, in which the principal actors participated. One activist commented on the first Preem action that ‘we talked a lot about what we would do, about timing, “when I do this then what do you do?”’ But although that action had a written dialogue, there were no rehearsals. Indeed, it seems that most of their activist actions were not rehearsed, even the more elaborate ones with written dialogue for the actors. ‘There is no time’, was the reason given by several participants. One of the activists said that several times she had joined an action on a very short notice—the same day that it was going to take place. In other words, there seems to be an imbalance between having many meetings to discuss, plan and prepare the action, but little or no time for rehearsals.

In contrast, the preparations and rehearsals of the Red Rebels are meticulous. The gestures, movements and choreographies are rehearsed beforehand, but more like a repertoire than an action script. The actual movements are improvised on site. There, typically one of the Red Rebels will take the lead, in the sense of giving directions to the others what to do, often through whispering. One activist describes how before an action the Red Rebels will meet at a quiet place, preferably at somebody’s house, in order to dress up and do makeup. During this process, they sit in a ring and discuss what is going to happen and what they will do:

Yes, we’ll talk before. We always have to get together, because it takes at least an hour to do this makeup and dressing up. So then you always have to gather at someone’s house. Lately it has been at NN’s house. It has been at my house and it has been at NN’s house. [...] You can’t do that in the street. It takes time. And there, when we do that, we also gather in a circle and talk and decide what to do and how to behave, and so on.

We always begin, every action in which I have participated [...], with Qigong. We stand in a circle. I have been doing Qigong for a long time, so I can lead it. We breath together, we share our universe and talk with each other and are together. It is very important and we conclude in the same way. [...] We want to express peacefulness, togetherness and that we all are one, that we are a unity and a togetherness. This we express bodily also through our forms, how we move.

In contrast to other forms of direct action performed by XR Stockholm, the Red Rebels rehearse gestures and movements, and they work hard on acting as co-ordinated group.

Executing & performing

Several times in the interviews, there appears the paradox, and frustration, that the activist actions, although creative, carefully planned, meticulously prepared (although not rehearsed), and also well executed, do not communicate, both in the sense of not having an audience where they are performed and not being covered by news media. An exception to the former is the action 'Lundin's Greenwash Party' in the King's Garden. One of the activists comments: 'It was an incredibly well executed action. Because there was both information, banners all around—the place is also perfect, it's like bleachers, spectator stands around the entire fountain.' She continued:

There were [...] XR activists speaking in megaphones and handing out flyers around the sides, that Lundin Oil had received new licenses to drill for oil. So that's what we celebrated. We represented Lundin Oil, board members, who celebrated by having a Greenwash Party. So we dyed the fountain green, completely non-toxic material.

[Showing a picture from the action] Here we wash ourselves with toilet brushes in the fountain. It worked well, because there was information all around. It was in part a spectacle, an insane spectacle in the fountain, you could just enjoy it, have fun with it in itself; but then you could also get information and immerse yourself in the background to it all. There were lots of activists around handing out leaflets, answering questions and so on. So I would say it was the most successful [action].

Several interviewees also suggested that there was a development from the previous actions at Preem, Norwegian Embassy and Bukowski's, which all had been small (in part due to restrictions during the pandemic) and without much outreach going on at the site of the action. One could add that another reason for the success of this action was the transformation of the fountain (Forum Pond) into a greenwashing spectacle. As suggested by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman (1956, 4), '*détournement* is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.' While staging the action in a familiar and recognisable place, the activist performance did not engage in rational

argument. That is, washing oneself with toilet brushes in a public fountain would have no place as an argument—e.g. in a newspaper article or a legal complaint—about a corporation misleading consumers and the general public.

Place

The design of the action will differ not only depending on what the place looks like, but also its location. If the action site is not in a central metropolitan area there is less reason to take into account interactions with the public. This is also the case if the action takes place in the city but in a place where people do not typically circulate, like at the Norwegian Embassy in the diplomatic quarter. Also, the time of day is important when it comes to planning an action. XR Stockholm has several times organised actions outside governmental institutions—such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance. For most parts of the day, there is not much commotion, but during lunch hours a blockade creates a considerable effect. Many activist actions have taken place outside or in the public area of the targeted business or organisation. Some have originated here and then moved on to a more public area, like the ‘Lundin’s Greenwash Party’, which began outside Bukowski’s and then continued in the King’s Garden.

As mentioned above, the activist actions by the Red Rebels often take place in conjunction with other XR actions, for instance a blockade of a street or an intersection. Here, it is not always possible to study the place in advance, but they will take in the place and the action on the spot, and hence will need to improvise. One of the activists responded to the question how the Red Rebels relate to place like this:

Yes, it is very important. There you have to, there must [be] someone in the group who has a sense of the visual. It is not so obvious. How does it work visually, for pictures and so on. So that you don’t hide something that you shouldn’t hide, because if you do it in combination with another action, you have to make sure that it shows up well in the picture. So then you have to position yourself strategically so that it looks good in terms of an image. [...] And then you have to take up place. And we do, that is to say, the [colour] red takes up place.

The expression 'take up place' may need to be unpacked a little. On the one hand, it is a question of making yourself visible in the urban landscape—through gestures, choreography, dress and colour. This also implies making a claim to this space, to take the right to be there and to make it into 'your place'. On the other hand, the expression refers to how an actor—or any skilful public speaker—physically positions themselves in a way so that everybody will look at them. This can also be emphasized by physical appearance and gestures. If there is anything at the site that can be used as a stage, that is helpful, but this is not always the case. If not, you need to find a spot or point in the urban landscape, that not only is visible, but also in a sense is commanding and affects the social movements and interactions in that place.

The activists engaged in a choreographic direct action interact in a complex social and urban environment, through which they want to create a movement and a sensorial impact. Small details such as toilet brushes in the hands of activists-actors, or the expression of a spectator watching the scene unfolding, can affect the overall composition of visual elements. However, planned action choreography can also have a negative effect on the visual impression of an action. For instance, in an XR march in Gothenburg in 2023, the organisers had placed the Red Rebels, together with another XR activist group called 'Oil Slicks' dressed in black, at the head. This may have made sense in terms of getting people's attention, but the integration of the Red Rebel and Oils Slicks into the march transformed it into a carnival, in particular when looking at pictures.

Another activist made a different kind of comment regarding place and place-making. He said that 'by taking up place in a place where you don't belong, you challenge and upset power relations.' The comment was made in relation to the actions at Preem, but is also relevant for other actions. One can also think of the Occupy movement (2011), which occupied places adjacent to financial centres (Reed, 2019, 325-370; Engler & Engler, 2017, *passim*). Similar to the move of taking in and transforming places of power is the act of dressing up as representatives of the fossil industry. In a longer historical perspective, this gesture resembles the medieval carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968), which subverts and liberates the assumptions of the hegemonic order through humour and disorder.

Another example highlights how the meaning of place can be challenged and transformed by an action. Whereas the Red Rebels usually do not perform their own actions, sometimes they do. An activist describes:

We did it during [the action] Money or Your Life. Then we went into some banks and there was a lot of outrage there at the banks. They were absolutely hysterical. But we did nothing, we just stood still. We walked very slowly and when they got upset and asked us to go out, we turned around and walked at an equally slow pace towards the door. This slowness thing is also very effective, because then we show that we are in this world but we are not of this world, as in another dimension that insinuates itself into this world. And in the bank it was scary, for the staff, for the public.

This comment highlights how placing an activist action *inside* a locale radically changes its impact, and can also be perceived as threatening for bystanders. For this reason, activist actions often take place on the threshold of the targeted institution, in the liminal space where outside and inside meet, ideally near or in the reception area. As Roland Barthes has noted in regard to the theatre of Racine, the antechamber is ‘the actual scene’ (*la scène proprement dite*), a space of ‘transmission’ that partakes of both ‘power and events, the concealed and the open’ (Barthes, 1979, 16). Situated between ‘the place of action’ and ‘the site of silence’, the antechamber is ‘the space of language’ (Barthes, 1979, 16). Similarly, the inside of an institution such as a bank is where decisions are made and the outside is where capital does its work. Both are largely inaccessible for a direct action. The theatrical—or spectacular—nature of this in-between space is also manifest in how companies and institutions design it as a space of communication. This is also what makes it so vulnerable to acts of *détournement*.

Media and mediation

As already mentioned, all actions are documented by photography and usually also filmed and live-streamed on social media. A live-stream on social media, contrary to what the name indicates, is also a recording, which makes it possible to play at a later time. The recorded film material can also be edited into a video that can be posted in social media channels. In most cases, the activists have sent a press release to news media. In the action design as well as in the press release, the issue (‘problem’), facts and demands are presented in a way that is clear and intelligible to the public and the media. However, this may not always be as obvious as it seems. The XR media group are often the last people to learn about an action, and are tasked

with writing press releases, assigning a photographer and writing posts for social media at short notice.

One of the activists commented on the algorithms of social media, which seem to make live-streams more visible than a post with a video or text + image. That means that on social media, live-streams reach more people than other formats. Because of this, she emphasised the importance of training people to make good live-streams. She argued that ideally there should be two people doing the live-stream, one holding the camera and the other reporting on what was going on, interviewing activists and so on. Looking at live-stream posts on social media, there is indeed a qualitative difference when a single person does a live-stream rather than two. In the former case, the video is usually primarily focused on the live-streamer, whereas in the latter it shifts more between the action and the person reporting from the scene. The activist also mentioned several times that the activist actions had involved a cameraperson, who would edit a short film of the action to be distributed on social media. XR Sweden also has a YouTube channel that makes video material more visible. I should add here that none of the activists I have interviewed work with film or digital media, and if I had interviewed an activist media maker, the perspective may have been different. It was clear from the interviews that these activists considered activism as primarily taking place in the physical world, not in and through media.

In the social media that the activists use—mainly Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, but also YouTube and TikTok—it is usually the first that has priority. The others will take posts/feeds from Facebook and remediate them. The reason for this is probably generational, that this is the social media they are familiar with themselves, rather than a thought-through media strategy. In terms of dissemination, it seems primarily to reach people already following them on social media, but there are also angered responses, from real people or trolls, which suggest that the reach is greater. The live-stream of some actions, such as the first one at Preem, was widely shared and hence was spread more widely. This was probably also the reason that many people watching the video initially believed that it was the real CEO of Preem that was being interviewed.

It can also be noted that on the XR Sweden website (XR Swe, 2023), there is no video material nor does it have a news page presenting actions in texts and pictures. But the website has a 'Press' page with press releases

and action pictures (plus a link to their Flickr page). However, pictures from activist actions are usually highlighted on the webpage, for instance by being included in the slideshow on the homepage.

Debriefing & evaluation

Equally important as detailed planning and careful preparations, immediately after an action there is a debriefing, when the activists go to a calm place and sit down to go through both how the action went and how they feel themselves. In contrast to debriefings after more confrontational actions, like blockades, when the debriefing session involves working through feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, etc, after an activist action the discussions are more related to the success of the acting and storytelling. Several activists said they would look at the live-stream together and check out the comments. From the evolution of the series of activist actions, it is clear that the assessments in the debriefing feed into planning new actions.

Reactions & reception

The responses to the activist actions happen in different ways. Most direct perhaps are the reactions at the place where the action is performed, but also here they can be more or less explicit. One activist commented on reactions to the Red Rebels:

I think I can say that you see how people react to it, how the public has an immediate emotional response to Red Rebels, to what we express. We express sadness, we express love, in different *tableaux* we make. And we are in agreement. I think people are not used to the fact that there is such a community. I think it's important that we show that. That anyone can join, join at any time and join this community, and be able to express that.

During any direct action, the role of the outreach group is to explain to bystanders what is going on and what it is about. They also explain what kind of organisation XR is and how they work to influence public opinion regarding the climate crisis. This work is very important both to explain to people the urgency of the issue and to listen to reactions from people watching an action. When people show an interest in the organisation, they will be invited to come to an introduction meeting, which are held regularly,

typically once a week. These introduction meetings are advertised both on social media and on XR Sweden's website.

As already mentioned, the majority of the activist actions performed by XR Stockholm were not very public, taking place inside office buildings or where not many people pass, where the interaction was limited to personnel and security guards or police officers. The major exception is the action 'Lundin's Greenwash Party', described above, which combined a spectacle in a centrally-located park with outreach. One activist complained that although the action was successful it 'received zero attention from the news media.' Another activist asked rhetorically why most mainstream news media had not shown an interest in their artistic actions, although they were both good and funny. He said that media only write about XR when there is some kind of disturbance or arrests. He speculated that it may in part be due to the internal organization of newspapers, where news reporters do not write about art and culture, and art critics and culture journalist cover institutions and established artists, and typically know weeks in advance what they should write about. He further speculated that perhaps XR should contact arts and culture editors at newspapers to establish contact and to describe and explain their activist actions. There is certainly more that could be done to spread their activist productions, including being covered by legacy media.

Other forms of public reactions come on social media posts (text, photo, live-stream, video), in the form of 'likes' and other emoticons as well as written comments. For the latter, the interviewed activists commented that the responses usually were positive and enthusiastic. For reasons mentioned above, live-stream gets more attention on social media than a video, and hence gets more likes and comments.

Art as device in activism

Because the focus in the interviews was on activism, it is natural that the respondents reflected on the question 'what is activism?' even if I did not ask this explicitly. One of the activists reflected: 'During a blockade of private jets at Bromma Airport, done together with Scientist Rebellion, the scientists wore white lab coats. The action itself was not that artistic, but the lab coat is a form of spectacle.' This suggests that it is difficult to set up sharp boundaries for the phenomenon. He also commented on the effects of activism, saying that 'activism provokes thoughts and feelings' and that 'the activistic [*det artistiska*] disrupts the mental order.'

Another activist said that, for her, activism includes art, rhetoric and film-making. She explained: 'We have been talking about the climate issue for a very long time, and how can you tell [people] about the problem that we already know about in a different way so that they listen? Then activism is probably required.' She continued:

Our problem is also that the media is tired of talking about this. Then we have to become reporters and talk about it in new ways. Then you can find a lot of inspiration in art. What I also think is so nice and funny about activism, is that it cannot be the same harsh treatment as against a normal protest with placards. The police often don't really know how to deal with us, they get confused and wait. I think people generally listen with interest, stop, more than at a normal protest. Things also become more shared [online], you can share with a different target group than hard-core activists.

In relation to traditional activism, she elaborated that:

the strength of an activist action is firstly that it can reach many more people but also because the action is not confrontational, they [the personnel at Preem] allowed us [to continue], which they would not have done at all if we had done something that was more heated and confrontational. The same thing in the treatment from the police, it becomes very different, more open and curious. None of the activist actions that I have been involved in have had anything other than support from the police. The public is also more receptive to an activist action, because it is not so confrontational.

Another participant had similar ideas. He said that 'when you do things playfully, the scary and threatening are toned down' and also that 'it is more difficult for the police to interrupt an artistic action than to interrupt a blockade.' He also suggested that for him, 'activism is a way of creating a distance to activism.' This is interesting in terms of how 'activism' is coded in contemporary society, not only referring to people who actively are working for social and political change, but taking on issues that are disregarded by both politicians and the media. For this reason, activists can be seen as annoying, in particular if they argue for lifestyle changes and transition to a sustainable society. Hence activism affords the possibility to

engage in activism in a different way. He also commented that when you are performing a role during an action, it is difficult to step out of the character. For instance, he mentioned how, when they walked around the reception at Preem, ‘we acted like we were Preem, and bragged about how good “we” were. When the police came, [my assistant] was upset about this oil on the floor, which we had spilled [laughs].’

Another activist commented on what artivism meant for her personally. At the end of the interview, she said:

Now I remember something, one of the most powerful things I’ve done. When we got the Martin Luther King Award and we went in the funeral procession [...] We were at a funeral. At the same time, we could change the mood when we were in church. It was my first, artivistically, I was in the choir. [...] And Black Friday at the mall, when we had the die-in and the choir stood by and sang. I thought that was so naughty [*busigt*] at the time.

The activist here refers to an action, in the form of a funeral march, that took place before XR Sweden received the Martin Luther King Award in December 2019 (Martin Luther King-priset, 2019). The activists were dressed in black and were carrying coffins. This was obviously a somber action, that expressed mourning and sorrow. However, when the procession arrived at the church for the prize ceremony, there was a shift in mood, to celebrate that the group had received this award. The activist mentions how she participated both in the funeral march and in choir singing in the church at the ceremony. In the quote, she also refers to an action that took place in a shopping mall in central Stockholm on Black Friday the same year, where she again sang in the XR choir. The word she used to describe the feeling is ‘*busig*’, which can be translated as mischievous or naughty, the central idea is a transgression of a rule or norm but without bad intentions and without doing any real harm. Here it also seems that artivism has offered a different and—perhaps—more interesting and stimulating way of engaging in activism. Artivism is of course not the only way in which people can grow when engaging in activism. Similar stories could be told by XR activists working with regenerative culture or outreach.

A striking feature in their comments on artivism was that, with one exception, they did not refer to activist actions by other climate groups, or by artists or social movements in general. Similarly, they made no references

to the tradition of political theatre and theatre as a form of resistance. The exception was the painter-conceptual artist who several times mentioned individual activist artists and groups, both as inspiration and comparisons. This lack of awareness among the activists of belonging to a tradition of using art as means for engaging in activism also reflects ignorance of the articulation of art and social protest in media and society in general.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show that activism is an important element of climate activism in an organisation like XR when it comes to designing and performing direct actions. The use of activism is a conscious choice by the activists, motivated both by a belief that it is more effective than traditional direct action and by a desire to engage in activism in different and more creative ways. The aesthetics of resistance is not only apparent in the artworks and spectacles themselves, but also in the places where they are performed. Surreptitiously occupying places of power, dressing up as people in power and revealing their hypocrisy challenges power structures in radically different ways than traditional street manifestations. The activists repeatedly emphasised inclusivity and that anybody can join, which is in line with XR's principles (Dahlberg, 2022). At the same time, the activist actions performed by XR Stockholm reflects the individuals engaged in this activity, in particular a group dynamic that, although difficult to account for, is essential for conceiving, preparing and performing their actions. As I have tried to show, the group structure is loose and informal; the core members of the XR Stockholm activist group—the ones interviewed for this study—have a varied background. The majority of the activist actions the group have performed, with the exception of the two actions at Preem, have been conceived in a collective manner, in discussions occurring in connexion with other actions, often at the weekly gatherings of the XR choir outside the National parliament building.

The focus in the article has been on meaning-making processes, on semiotics and aesthetics, on what the activists engaged in activism do and how they do it. I have attempted to frame these activities historically and aesthetically, although there is certainly more to say about this, both about the effectiveness of activism and the resistance against activist art in the artworld. As the account of the interviews hopefully has shown, activism also generates an energy and pleasure that is crucial for the sustainability

of the activist group. One of the negative dimensions of activism revealed in this study is, perhaps surprisingly, that it often fails to generate interest in mainstream media. It would seem that the activists need to find ways to confront and break down the prejudice against activist art in both the artworld and in news media. Similarly, they could probably be more creative in their use of digital media and media ecology.

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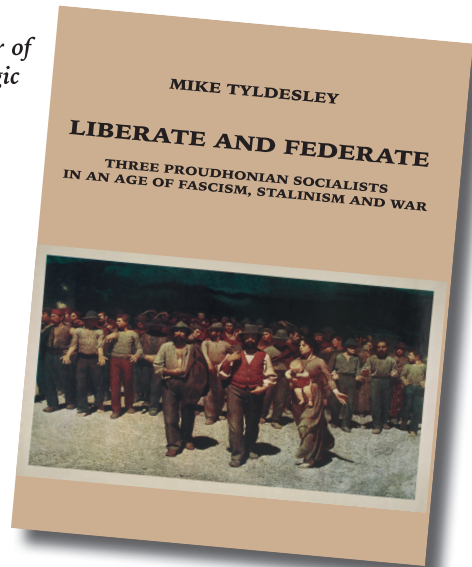
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Mike Tyldesley's *Liberate and Federate* comes at an important time in the revival of studies on Proudhonism and fills an important gap in the literature. While the three figures examined in this book have been neglected, particularly in the English-speaking world, Dr Tyldesley demonstrates the novelty of their ideas as well as the impact of their lives on the anti-totalitarian currents of the twentieth century. Anyone interested in the influence of Proudhon's ideas during the "midnight of the century" should read this book.

Dr Cayce Jamil, Assistant Director of Research Development and Strategic Alliances, Johnson C. Smith University. Editor, Pierre Ansart, Proudhon's Sociology.



The book is available here:

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