

Extinction Rebellion

Grief Made Visible: *The symbolism And Impact Behind XR's Protests*

The group, founded in 2018, aims to get Governments world wide to address the climate and ecological crisis through non-violent civil disobedience and artistic expression.

‘Extinction Rebellion’s actions are peaceful, powerful and creative, telling a story about the dangers we face.’¹ - Extinction Rebellion website.



Extinction Rebellion²: the group described as “crusties”³ by the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has rapidly evolved into one of the most disruptive and determined forces in the fight for environmental justice. Founded in the UK in 2018, the movement has gained global attention through acts of civil disobedience, and art based demonstrations. More than just a series of protests, Extinction Rebellion represents a growing demand for radical change in the face of climate collapse.

Central to XR’s identity is its powerful use of symbolism. The movement’s emblem (A circled hourglass) serves as a reminder of the decreasing time humanity has to avert the damage created by climate change. Designed by an anonymous artist, the symbol has become ubiquitous, adorning flags, clothing and murals worldwide. It serves as a rallying point, inviting people of all backgrounds to join the call for climate action before time runs out.

With their vivid symbolism and bold artistic protests, they are challenging power, and forcing a global reckoning that highlights time is running out. The artistic approach to their protests are far from typical protest, these acts are deeply symbolic, haunting, beautiful and impossible to ignore. They are deliberately disruptive in order to create empathy. The use of colour, silence and choreography transform public spaces into stages for collective grief and urgent warning. While their tactics capture headlines, do they truly help gain a deeper understanding of the climate crisis?



Climate activists are staging protests on four of London's busiest bridges⁴ (2022)

¹ <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/about/>

² <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/about/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48607989>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-61120179>

Extinction Rebellion: *A Movement For Climate Justice*

The group aims to get government action to address the climate and ecological crisis through non-violent civil disobedience. Their core demands include: calling all institutions and Governments to ‘tell the truth’ about climate change, reduce carbon emissions to net-zero by 2025 (Kept this target to show how much time has been lost since the target was set in 2018) and create citizens assemblies to oversee climate policy.

When we rise to take action, to share the truth, and unite against climate injustices, we’re stronger.⁵- Extinction Rebellion website.

Extinction Rebellion are recognised for their bold yet peaceful methods including blocking major transport routes, occupying public spaces, and staging dramatic demonstrations. These tactics, though controversial, have successfully forced climate issues into global headlines. Few can deny the role Extinction Rebellion has played in advancing climate action and influencing the rise of related groups like ‘Just stop oil’. Extinction Rebellion inspires individuals around the world to realise that meaningful change is possible, but only if we act now, together.

Grief Made Visible:

The Red Rebel Brigade

These performers, first seen in 2019, dressed in red robes and white face paint, walked silently down protest zones in major cities like London, Berlin and Sydney.

The red Rebels became iconic imagery used in XR protests world wide.

‘Red Rebel Brigade symbolises the common blood we share with all species, That unifies us and makes us one.’ - Red Rebel Website⁷



Extinction Rebellion Red Brigade performers also staged a protest in Berlin, Germany⁶

⁵ <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/>

⁶ <https://metro.co.uk/2019/10/07/red-brigade-silently-appear-extinction-rebellion-protests-10875730/#>

⁷ <https://redrebelbrigade.com/>

While the Red Rebel Brigade's performances are intended to be symbolic and thought-provoking, They have evoked mixed reactions from the public. Some find their silent, slow-moving displays powerful, while some members of the public have found them confusing or unsettling. Observers have likened the group's appearance to that of a cult.⁸ Critics have also questioned the impact of the performances. While



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the visual displays are designed to evoke emotional responses, some argue that the lack of spoken words or explicit calls to action leaves their purpose unclear. Yet, the group's silence could be seen as a deliberate strategy, to get people to question and talk about these issues outside of protest.

Personally, they didn't need to speak to communicate the urgency of the climate crisis. The flowing red robes and slow movements felt like a symbol of loss.

To me, they represented grief, urgency and care all at once. It made me think about how protest doesn't always need to be confrontational, it can be quiet, symbolic and still deeply effective.

“We will bring the message that it’s now ‘code red’ for humanity, for climate, and for nature. There is not a single moment more to waste, and policymakers who don’t come to the table ready to make sacrifices really will have blood on their hands.”¹⁰

Grief Made Visible: *Blood Of Our Children*



⁸ <https://community.babycentre.co.uk/post/a34094459/red-rebel-brigade-protests?>

⁹ <https://redrebelbrigade.com/>

¹⁰ <https://rugbyobserver.co.uk/news/red-rebels-from-rugby-to-join-train-pilgrimage-to-cop26/>

Extinction Rebellion protestors with red paint outside Downing Street. Credit: Soila Apparicio ¹¹

The 'Blood of Our Children' protest occurred in March 2019, activists apart of XR and others, staged a dramatic demonstration outside Downing Street in London. The protesters poured litres of fake blood made out of syrup, food colouring, water and cornflour onto the road, Symbolising the 'death of our children' due to the effects of climate change. This caused quite the controversy within the media due to the disturbance and the uneasy imagery. However it brought together a lot of people, including young children who wished to speak up on the matter.

'I am here today because I am scared, I'm scared for all the youth in the areas around the globe who are already having to deal with the problems of climate change'¹²- Felix, 14

Overall reactions were mixed. Some members of the public viewed the protest as a powerful statement on climate inaction, while others criticised it as reckless and counterproductive. The act of pouring blood down the street can be seen as disturbing or quite gory to some. However, in my opinion, the whole point of this protest was to make people feel uneasy. It's impactful because it shows the hard hitting truth many want to deny.



'The Blood of Our Children' - Real Media (Youtube)

What stood out to me about this protest was the power of symbolism. The activists pouring something as simple as red liquid outside Downing street made the invisible visible. It made the climate crisis feel urgent and personal. I find it powerful how they used art and performance to represent something so serious. It showed how protests can go beyond just words and statistics.

¹¹

<https://www.desmog.com/2019/03/09/climate-change-means-real-death-real-blood-extinction-rebellion-paints-downing-st-red/>

¹² <https://realmedia.press/i-am-scared/>

‘We are here to mourn the loss of life, and for the life that has not yet been born and to protest the injustice of this for future generations.’¹³ -

Paolo, 61



Extinction Rebellion activists march through East London, Oct 12th 2019

Grief Made Visible: *Skeletons Rebellion*

The Skeletons Rebellion is one of Extinction rebellion’s most visually striking protests. It features life-sized skeletal figures crafted from repurposed materials like newspapers, piping and found objects.

These skeletal creations represent

endangered and extinct life forms, serving as a reminder of the loss driven by the climate crisis.

Designed to be both haunting and humorous, aiming to engage the public emotionally and provoke reflection on humanity’s role in the ongoing environmental crisis. The skeletons' rebellion was a unique way of reflecting on life already lost by climate change. The protest was immersive and eye opening.

“We’re connecting with our grief for the huge amount of species that have already been lost, for those people who have already been impacted by climate change, for our brothers and sisters across the globe,”¹⁴

-Clarissa Carlyon

Walking sculptures through London¹⁵

The Skeletons Rebellion stood out to me because it used creativity to make a serious issue feel real. Seeing the handmade skeletons made from



¹³

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6790625/Climate-change-protesters-leave-children-playing-in-ke-blood-dumping-200-litres-London.html>

¹⁴

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/12/uk-climate-activists-hold-funeral-procession-for-the-plane-t>

¹⁵

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7565963/Doctors-nurses-join-Extinction-Rebellion-demo-Shels-London-HQ.html>

everyday materials was a strong visual reminder of the damage we are doing to the planet. It shows thoughtful and artistic approaches can be just as powerful. It makes people stop and look. Perhaps disturbing to some but that is the entire point of these protests. I believe the Skeletons rebellion is a great example of how art can help people connect emotionally to environmental issues.

Grief Made Visible

Extinction Rebellion is a network of people who care deeply about the future of our planet, all human beings, and all living things¹⁶ - Extinction Rebellion Website

Extinction Rebellion stands at the intersection of art and activism, harnessing the power of symbolism to confront environmental challenges. Through imagery and bold performances, XR has arguably reimaged protest as a form of storytelling. As the movement continues to evolve, its legacy will be defined not only by its demands but by its ability to inspire collective action through art.

In a world where it's easy to scroll past a crisis, art makes people pause. It reaches us emotionally and that emotional connection can be what sparks action. Art can speak just as loudly as any other protest, sometimes louder. These protests stick in people's minds. They are hard to ignore and more importantly they encourage reflection. Artistic and performative protest is useful, it's disruptive, disturbing and eerie for a reason. The entire point of these protests is to make people feel disturbed, the imagery they use is real and powerful which is why viewers find it hard to look at.

¹⁶ <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/about/>