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NYPD Detains Activists for Anti-Koch Light Graffiti at the Met

Ben Davis, Thursday, September 11, 2014

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A protester casts a spell on David H. Koch on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Photo: Courtesy of Erik McGregor

On Tuesday, three activists were detained by NYPD officers outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art after disrupting a gala honoring David H. Koch. The controversial billionaire was being fêted for his \$65 million contribution to the newly reopened museum plaza, which prominently bears his name (see "Protesters Crash Koch Plaza Opening at the Met"). The three activists, Kyle Depew, Grayson Earle, and Yates McKee, were caught projecting images from a customized art truck onto the museum's façade that read "The Met: Brought to you by the Tea Party" and "Koch = Climate Chaos"—references to Koch's well-known role in funding right-wing and climate change denying groups.

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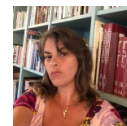
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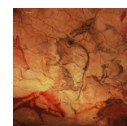
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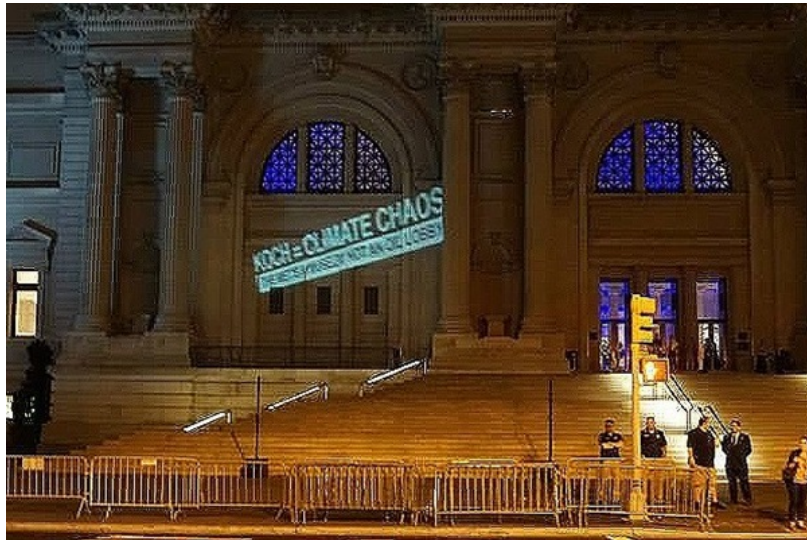
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The incident followed a protest earlier in the day by the tenacious Occupy Wall Street spin-off Occupy Museums, which by all accounts brought a good-spirited group of art activists to the newly opened David H. Koch Plaza to stage anti-Koch performances. Early in the evening, the activists unexpectedly had a chance to confront Koch himself on the steps of the museum, chanting “Shame on climate change denier” as he passed by on the way to his car.

After darkness had fallen, the NYC Light Brigade, known for spelling out activist slogans in illuminated lettering, moved into formation with signs that spelled out the phrase “Koch = Climate Chaos.”



Light graffiti on the facade of the Met Museum.

Depew, Earle, and McKee were on the scene manning The Illuminator (at one time nicknamed the “Occupy Batmobile”), a souped-up, projector-equipped van that travels the city projecting activist imagery and slogans. In the past, The Illuminator crew has worked with Occupy Museums, projecting “1% Museum” onto the Guggenheim as part of a protest connected to the lack of guarantees of workers’ rights in the construction of that museum’s upcoming Abu Dhabi branch.

With the Global Climate Convergence scheduled for New York next weekend—a massive environmentalist demonstration timed to coincide with the UN Climate Summit—the activists saw the Koch protest at the Met as a way to bring together two issues: the influence of the super-rich over art and climate change denial, Earle told artnet News.

Following the Occupy Museums and NYC Light Brigade actions, The Illuminator van made several passes near the museum as guests were still filtering in, projecting the anti-Koch messages onto the façade. On their third pass, they were pulled over by the police, and later handcuffed and taken to the police station, where they spent several hours in detention.

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The NYPD stopping The Illuminator
Photo: Courtesy Jon Steiner

The three activists were ticketed for illegal advertising. “They really should have charged us with ‘bothering a rich person’s dinner party,’” Earle told artnet News, “because that’s what it’s really for.”

While the NYPD returned The Illuminator van itself, the group’s high-tech projector has been impounded through November 5, meaning they will not be able to use it during the Climate Convergence.

Despite the setback, they will continue their activism. “We’re not going to stop,” Earle said. “I really hope that we can use this arrest as a platform to remind people who David Koch is, and remind the Met and its followers that it is below them to be associated with this man.”

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