

# How Art Can Inspire Viewers Toward Climate Action

Tom Jacobs July 24, 2019



*"Une Arche de Noé Pour le Climat," an installation of lucite animal figures created by Gad Weil and exhibited at the COP21 climate summit in Paris in December of 2015. (Photo: Ted Scheinman/Pacific Standard)*

*New research finds that art with an activist bent can engage and inspire—if it offers hope.*

Can art change the world? Or can it at least inspire people to engage with an urgent issue they'd otherwise be inclined to ignore?

A new study of activist art about climate change suggests that art can be an effective form of activism—if artists create compelling works that call attention to the problem *and* offer hope for a solution.

Artworks that achieve this tricky balance "have the potential to retell the stories of climate

change in a way that activates the slumbering potential in our societies," write Laura Kim Sommer and Christian A. Klöckner of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

The researchers explored public reactions to works of visual art that were exhibited as part of ArtCOP21—a festival that coincided with the 2015 United Nations climate change conference in Paris.

# Pacific Standard

They collected data from 874 people who looked at 37 artworks that were part of the exhibit. The pieces were spread around the city of Paris, in museums, galleries, and public outdoor spaces. "A majority of people did not know they were visiting an environmental art festival," the researchers note; many were simply passing by and came across one of the pieces by chance.

After looking at a given work, each participant completed a questionnaire in which they rated the quality of the piece on a one-to-seven scale. They also reported the degree to which the work evoked certain feelings in them, including "happiness," "hope," and "a sense of awe," as well as the degree to which the piece seemed relevant to their daily lives; how much it made them think and reflect on its meaning; and how much it inspired them to consider their own role in perpetuating climate change.

Based on their responses, the researchers grouped the works into four categories: "The Comforting Utopia," "The Challenging Dystopia," "The Mediocre Mythology," and "The Awesome Solution."

The first group featured "playful, participatory, colorful" works that "visualize a 'utopia'—a better future." These works were rated as low in artistic quality, and participants reported that they inspired little reflection or awareness. The second group of works pictured dystopian scenarios; they evoked negative emotions, but "did not trigger participants to reflect more, or clarify their own role within the climate crisis."

The third group of artworks used mythological themes to illustrate environmental ideas. These pieces were viewed as "neither very shocking nor very exciting," and did not move viewers to reflection or action.

The final group of pieces were "beautiful and colorful depictions of sublime nature that are showing solutions to environmental problems." These works elicited "mostly positive reactions," leaving viewers feeling happy, hopeful, and with a sense of awe.

This cluster of pieces included "a beautiful carpet of flowers made from upcycled material," as well as two works that addressed the loss of biodiversity, "while at the same time showing the

sublime beauty of certain animals, making cause and effect of human behavior visible."

These pieces left viewers feeling significantly more inspired and enthusiastic about climate action than artworks in the other clusters, according to the researchers. "Crucially, these positive emotions prompted people to reflect significantly more [and] be more aware of personal consequences, and of their own role in climate change," the team writes.

The researchers concede that art embodying all of these qualities is difficult to create. Out of the 37 works they studied, they placed only three in this final category.

"Not many artists, politicians, or communicators manage to bring up a relevant topic that is in the back of people's minds and depict it in a way that is surprising and engaging, while simultaneously representing generally accepted values," the researchers write in the journal *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*.

But most artists love a challenge. And Sommer and Klöckner are offering an important one.

"We suggest that activist art, including environmental art, should move away from a dystopian way of depicting the problems of climate change," they conclude. Rather, activist artists should keep in mind the power of "offering solutions, and emphasizing the beauty and interconnectedness of nature."