GARAGE

Ring the Alarm: Artists Respond to Climate Change

If the purpose of art is to make people see the world in new ways—to open their eyes—then it's never been so urgent. Some artists are doing more than preaching to the choir.

By Rose Lichter-Marck | Apr 22 2020, 9:52am

KATIE PATERSON, "VATNAJÖKULL (THE SOUND OF)," 2007/8, PHOTO © IAN EVANS, 2007. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND INGLEBY, EDINBURGH.

The land is burning. The seas are rising. Islands erode into the ocean. The air is toxic. Refugees flee their devastated homelands. Wars ignite over disappearing resources. Governments refuse to implement, or otherwise work to roll back, protections while large corporations despoil the environment with virtual impunity. The planet is warming at a rapid pace due to human activity, and without radical, systemic action that challenges the status quo, mass destruction is inevitable.

It's no wonder that "environmental melancholia," as the social scientist Renee Lertzman calls the feelings of grief and trauma caused by these facts, feels like the forever #Mood. In a 2017 special report, the American Psychological Association acknowledged that climate depression and anxiety are a dangerous public health risk, and could be impediments to motivating people to do the work to prevent worse outcomes. Mental health professionals are addressing climate grief as part of their therapeutic treatment, and support groups are popping up to prevent people from slipping into the gloom. Even life scientists who choose to dedicate their entire careers to understanding climate change are suffering bouts of mental illness in response to the awful reality that they face day to day. In a time when positive thinking seems naive, nihilism is epidemic.

In her work, Lertzman argues that art is a crucial tool for envisioning a way forward. Art about climate change can be an antidote to both blithe optimism and crushing resignation—in other words, it's a search for the miraculous. By posing the questions we don't always remember to ask when bombarded with the facts, by returning us to the realm of feeling and affect, "art can be an invocation, an invitation to think: What kind of world do you want?"

Much art about climate change is suffused with "solastalgia," a term coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe, in his words, "the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation)." Naturally, melting ice is an obvious but potent metaphor; you can witness it disappear in real time. No wonder so much art about climate change looks to the poles.

In 2007, Katie Paterson submerged a microphone at the foot of Iceland's thawing Vatnajökull Glacier, offering a phone number to the public that anyone in the world could call to hear live the last creaks and pops of ice as it

vanished into the lagoon forever. Ólafur Elíasson's ongoing series of interventions extends that sensory experience, bringing actual chunks of Arctic ice into gallery or urban spaces—in the case of Your Waste of Time (2006), from Vatnajökull Glacier itself—to be smelled, tasted, touched, listened to, breathed in, breathed upon, examined from up close. For *Ice Watch* (2018), Elíasson placed pieces of glacier in the open air of London, so that they would melt as fast or slow as chance (in the form of the weather, or human touch and breath) would allow. Science about climate change is "often very disembodied," Elíasson has explained. "There's no memory [of it] in our bodies... [Art can] bring a physical narrative to something that one knows."

In Zaria Forman's hyper-realistic, mural-scale vistas of polar bergs and rising seas, hard realities about melting sea ice and rising temperatures are transmuted into sublime landscapes. Forman says that her art makes an emotional argument for protecting the Earth: Why allow something so beautiful to be destroyed? The images transcend that platitude, however, because they themselves are beautiful, sensual, even soulful objects, perhaps because the artist draws with color pastels on her fingertips, applying mortal touch to every curve of ice and chop of wave. The humanity of her work is what clarifies her call to action. When her photographer mother passed away before an expedition they were meant to take to Greenland, Forman scattered her ashes into the sea she would later draw. This detail is reminiscent of Sophie Calle's 2009 work *North Pole*, which saw the artist plant items signifying her recently deceased mother on the icy shores of Greenland's Disko Bay: a ring, a necklace, a photograph. The makeshift memorials link her personal sorrow with solastalgia, and the awareness that this place, too, shall be lost, and mourned.

SOPHIE CALLE, PÔLE NORD / NORTH POLE, 2018 (FROM THE SERIES PARCE QUE / BECAUSE) © SOPHIE CALLE / ADAGP, PARIS 2020 / PHOTO: CLAIRE DORN / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PERROTIN

In Josh Kline's *Climate Change: Part One*(2019), miniature dystopias carry us past the tipping-point present into the near future of inevitable destruction. In cooled vitrines, water from lumps of ice meant to thaw over the course of the six-week-long show subsumed fantastical, mud-sculpted cityscapes organized by building type: T*ransnational Finance, Technological Innovation*, and *Representative Government*. The calamity is in progress; the end is already in sight. "What is left after the water washes everything away?" the artist asks. The answer is yet to come.

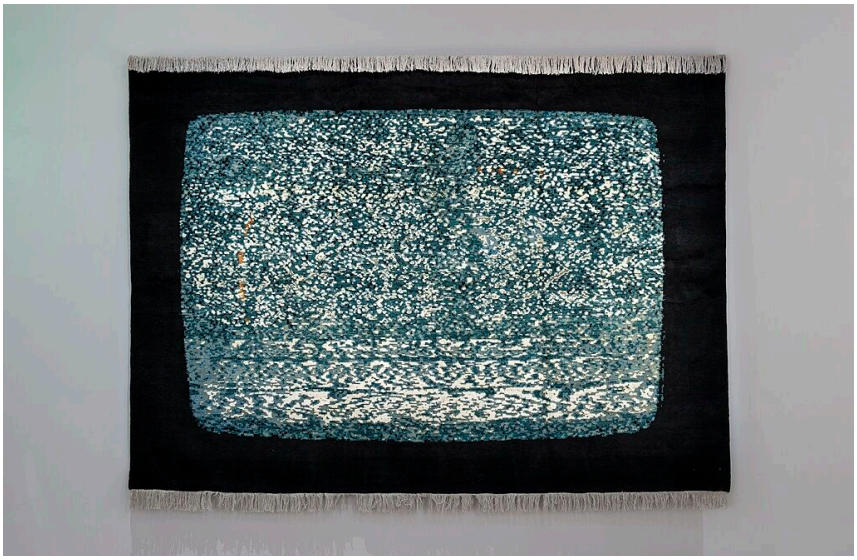
Last spring, a panel of scientists voted to establish a new epoch, the Anthropocene, to mark the period, starting in the middle of the last century, when human activity began to permanently alter the planet. Environmental philosopher and artist Jonathon Keats is convinced that understanding the Anthropocene as only a short chapter in the long history of the Earth makes a future imaginable. He invented a pinhole camera that requires 1,000 years to make an exposure—an antidote, he suggests, to the "Anthropocenic fatalism" that makes us the subjects rather than the agents of change. The images that his cameras capture all over the world will be records of years passing, of the way change happens. They link this moment with the next. They are "a mental prosthesis" that allows us "to be able to be in and of the future" while remaining in our own time. If we can picture the future, perhaps we can imagine working in the present to make it one worth living.

A recent paper published in the journal Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts examined responses to climate-change-inspired works at an arts festival concurrent with the 2015 United Nations climate-change conference in Paris. It found that among the four categories of artworks present—"the comforting utopia," "the challenging dystopia," "the mediocre mythology," and "the awesome solution"—only the last inspired positive, motivating feelings in viewers. Dr. Elizabeth Sawin, cofounder and co-director of Climate Interactive, champions that approach: "To address the climate crisis, we need to create a lot that does not yet exist. New infrastructure,

new habits, new ways of relating to each other and to the planet. And that's what artists do, right? Create something new, by first imagining it and then giving it form."

Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio's ongoing *Bending the River Back into the City* is one such project. Merging industry, ecology, and art practice, they use L.A.'s first and only private water-right permit to divert 106 acre-feet of water from the Los Angeles River a year. Tainted waste water is reclaimed through a process using volcanic rock, native plants, and vibrational frequencies, then redistributed to nearby public parks. The piece itself performs a transmutation; it also suggests the possibilities of infrastructure's transformation on a grander scale.

Last summer, when 16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg announced she would be sailing from Sweden to New York for the UN Climate Action Summit aboard the Malizia II yacht captained by Pierre Casiraghi, a phrase popped into my head. In Search of the Miraculous is the title of a 1973 artwork by Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader. Ader, whose works involved him tumbling off his home's pitched roof, bicycling into an Amsterdam canal, and hanging from a tree and then falling into a creek, explored the effect of unseen forces on his own body, whether it was the laws of physics or the depths of emotion or the pull of unspoken dreams. In Search of the Miraculous saw him setting out to cross the Atlantic alone on a yellow 12.5-foot dinghy. It was his last, unfinished piece; he was lost at sea, the only evidence of his tragic end being the broken boat that washed up on the shores of Spain. Looking at pictures of Greta's solar-powered yacht, I fretted that her mission to spur action on climate change could be another tragic search for the miraculous, this time the miracle being the possibility of protecting Earth from ourselves.



NICHOLAS GALANIN, "WHITE NOISE, AMERICAN PRAYER RUG," 2018, WOOL, COTTON.
IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG SMITH

Climate change, whether or not humanity acts to ameliorate it, demands a great reordering, not just of infrastructure, economy, science, and justice, but of the self. What future do we dream of, what will we fight for? Last year's Whitney Biennial was marked by a protest against a museum board member whose company manufactured the tear gas used on migrants, many of them climate refugees, at the border. *White Noise, American Prayer Rug*, by Nicholas Galanin, one of the artists whose demands brought about the board member's resignation, is a woven textile that depicts the static of a television with no signal. It's a powerful blast of visual noise, in Galanin's words, "a droning sound to distract us from our own suffering, from love, from land, from water, from connection." A droning sound to distract us from our rage. A previous work, *We Dreamt Deaf* (2015), takes the inability to hear that roar of rage as its title. A taxidermied polar bear, shot in the 1970s by a white hunter in an Alaskan village so threatened by climate change that it was forced to relocate, crawls on its front legs, while its hindquarters puddle into a furry, flat rug. As Galanin puts it, the polar bear is "an iconic symbol of the struggle for survival," not just for the animals and their environment, but for the indigenous people and the land that have been plundered thanks to colonial, capitalist avarice. Perhaps the bear is melting backward into oblivion, unable to wake us with its roar, destined to be another lifeless trophy. But to me, it seems Janus-faced. Its reconstitution in corporeal bear form suggests the inverse of oblivion: an emergence from destruction, a rising up. A miracle. Maybe we'll hear the growling just in time.