The Arts and The Natural World: Envisioning Pathways to a Sustainable Future

September 19–21, 2019
The Redford Center at the Sundance Mountain Resort and Sundance Preserve, Utah
Introduction

We have long relied upon artists’ searing vision to provide insight into the most pressing issues of their time. At this moment, no topic seems more urgent than that of climate change, as it sits at the forefront of political debate, public opinion, and media coverage. In a 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it was found that if action is not taken, global warming and the climate crisis will have “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”\(^1\) The environmental impact of the climate crisis has resulted in severe societal implications on a global scale, including mass displacement and migration of climate refugees, global food and energy shortages, widespread public health concerns, an increase in extreme weather events, and more.

As individuals, organizations, and governments come together to discuss climate adaptation and mitigation, it is clear that there is a need for creative solutions in how we educate the public about the climate crisis, how we advocate for policy changes, and how we adapt to our ever changing environment.

Art & Visualization of the Climate Crisis

Artist-activists across the globe are utilizing public art actions as a tool for bringing awareness to the climate crisis. Environmental issues are complex and understanding their impact often requires envisioning the tangible effect that climate change has on communities across the globe. The ability to visually represent issues like sea level rise, loss of biodiversity, and melting glacial ice is critical to promoting public understanding of our climate reality. Research shows that visual representations of complex issues are important, particularly because visuals can be comprehended in as little as 13 milliseconds.\(^2\) Imagery and visual depictions of climate change and environmental issues are crucial to evoking an emotional response to what is seen by many as an abstract issue. Researchers have found

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that artistic representations of complex scientific data benefit the work of scientists in interpreting their data, while also making scientific issues more accessible to the general public.\(^3\)

In the 2019 study entitled *Does Activist Art Have the Capacity to Raise Awareness in Audiences?*, an analysis was conducted on the capacity of activist art in activating a “stimulating psychological effect” on audiences.\(^4\) The study recommends that artists and environmental justice advocates collaborate together to fully realize the potential of positive change. In particular, this study is significant because it draws upon the visceral, emotional, and cognitive impact that art can have on audiences and participants and highlights the value of creating emotional connections to the climate crisis as crucial to engaging communities in advocating for real policy changes.

For the United Nations Climate Change Summit (COP 21) in 2015, Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson gathered 80 tons of icebergs from Greenland and installed them in front of the iconic Panthéon in Paris in a clock-like formation in a work entitled, “Ice Watch.” A visualization of the alarming rate at which our polar ice caps are melting, the work was a powerful reflection of the urgency of the issue. Eliasson told Reuters News, “I hope [this] work of art can actually bridge the gap between the data, the scientists, the politicians and heads of state and how normal people feel.”\(^5\)

In 2011, photographer Susan Meiselas co-curated the COAL + ICE Project\(^6\), a traveling documentary photography and video exhibition that included work from more than 40 artists from around the world and exhibited alongside climate festivals “to amplify the conversation about climate change…. COAL + ICE visually narrates the consequences triggered by the continued use of fossil fuels, following the trajectory of climate change from the dirty coal mines deep within the Earth to the vanishing glaciers of the Greater Himalaya. The exhibition culminates in global consequences and an exploration of visionary solutions.”

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\(^6\) COAL+ICE Project. https://coalandice.org/
The current Venice Biennale is hosting an exhibition inspired by Lauren Bon and Metabolic Studio’s piece Neon (2008), which is featured on page two of this paper. Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy is based upon a quote by artist Sherrie Rabinowitz from 1984. The exhibition includes a group of more than 70 international artists whose work focuses on climate issues.

Mel Chin’s 2018 installation in Times Square, entitled Wake, brought attention to the issue of sea level rise to the heart of Manhattan. The piece included a virtual reality component that allowed spectators to envision the city under water. Wake, with its double entendre title, brought attention to the threat of sea level rise by making the reality of the issue tangible to its participants.

Poets Jaqueline Suskin and Lindsay Emi and singer/songwriter Mercedes Ferreira-Dias create calls to contemplation and action through the work that they create. As an artist, producer, and activist, Sol Guy mobilizes like-minded individuals from all sectors, building communities through common cause.

On a local level, the cities of Miami and Miami Beach, FL have long understood the value of their local artists. Xavier Cortada has, for decades, worked as an artist within his community, including schools, to help people understand the fragility of their coastal ecosystem and the need for each citizen to own the responsibility of care. As the first artist to serve as the chairman of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, Xavier’s voice is elevated within local government.

Misael Soto is emblematic of how artists can successfully collaborate with government agencies to engage the public in addressing climate change. Misael worked closely with the municipal office in Miami and produced several installations along the shorelines in Miami Beach.8

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The notion of embedding an artist’s residency within Miami was proposed and supported by the Art Center of South Florida (now Oolite Arts). The collaboration was so successful that, following the residency, Misael was hired to be the first artist-in-residence in Miami Beach’s Office of Resilience.

“I’ve always found it ingenious how artists think about not only physical projects, but also things such as policy decisions and ways to inform the way the public engages and thinks as well.”

Brandi Reddick
City of Miami Beach Cultural Affair Manager

Media & Organizing: The Importance of Storytelling in Climate Justice Advocacy

Storytelling is a critical component of climate change activism and advocacy. By centering the narratives of people and communities and how they are tangibly impacted by climate change, the scope of the problem becomes more accessible. One example of the power of storytelling and media is the work of Participant Media, particularly in the production of An Inconvenient Truth and An Inconvenient Sequel. Both films were key catalysts in propelling the issue of climate change to the forefront of public discourse.

Using a nonprofit model, the Redford Center—co-founded in 2005 by Robert Redford and his son and board chair, James Redford—harnesses the power of film, video, and new media to engage people through inspiring stories that galvanize environmental action through original
productions, and also supports other impact driven productions that are focused upon “stories of individuals taking action to protect and restore the planet.” The Redford Center also has launched an environmental storytelling program and toolkit for school-aged children, so that the next generation of artist/activists can be ignited to act.

Environmental Justice
The effects of climate change will have the most severe impact on the most vulnerable populations. Mass displacement will result in the creation of climate diasporas, threatening the livelihood and preservation of indigenous and vulnerable communities, along with their arts and cultural histories. According to the United Nations report entitled World Economic and Social Survey 2016: Climate Change Resilience—an Opportunity for Reducing Inequalities, it was found that in the last 20 years approximately 4.2 billion individuals have been affected by extreme weather events and natural disasters. Lower-income communities and developing nations are disproportionately at risk of experiencing the impacts of climate change. Considering the disparate impact that climate change and other environmental issues have on marginalized communities, it is critical that an environmental justice approach be taken in protecting and advocating for vulnerable communities.

At the 2018 Equal Justice Initiative’s Peace & Justice Summit, former vice president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore spoke about the interconnectedness of environmental justice and climate change. In his opening introduction, Gore quoted Pope Francis in framing the intertwined relationship of ecological and social change: “A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach, it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cries of the Earth and the cries of the poor.”

Vice President Gore discussed the disproportionate impact that climate change is having and will continue to have on the disenfranchised, most marginalized members of society. Later, while in conversation with Catherine Coleman-Flowers, the two discussed the public health implications of pollutants in Black communities, including the prominence of cancer in such communities and the importance of unified efforts to demand change. The discussion also included the notion of climate gentrification, where displacement caused by environmental impacts of climate change will gentrify surrounding areas of those regions.

12 World Economic and Social Survey.
According to the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program, communities of color and of low income residents are subjugated to the placement of toxic facilities in their communities.\textsuperscript{14} The program asserts that “race is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities” in the US. In an US Environmental Protection Agency study entitled \textit{Disparities in Distribution of Particulate Matter Emission Sources by Race and Poverty Status}, researchers found clear evidence of environmental racism across the country.\textsuperscript{15} The report found that Black communities are more susceptible to particulate matter emissions, particularly in living near particulate matter emitting facilities. Whether it be extreme weather events or ongoing struggles to protect communities from toxic chemicals, it is evident that the most marginalized members of our society are subjugated to the brunt of environmental issues and climate change affects.

Kivalina is an Iñupiaq whaling community in Northwest Alaska that is among the first climate refugee communities in our nation due to the rising sea levels and the melting of the sea ice that used to protect it. This community has taken a radical approach by creating Re-Locate Kivalina, which “is a team of artists, architects, environmental justice lawyers, anthropologists, and others working in partnership with community members to help them envision and create a plan for relocation that not only keeps the community physically safe, but also sustains their cultural traditions.”\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{quote}
\textit{“As climate changes occur and certain parts of the world become less inhabitable, whole communities will have to migrate in what has been termed a climate diaspora. This diaspora will, initially, disproportionately impact marginalized native populations with fragile, rich cultural histories.”}
\end{quote}

\textit{Arts & America: Essays on Arts, Culture, and the Future of America’s Communities.} (Americans for the Arts, 2015: 120)

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\textsuperscript{14} NAACP. Environmental and Civic Justice [webpage]. Accessed September 8, 2019 at https://www.naacp.org/issues/environmental-justice/


An Overview of Funding at the Intersection of Arts & Environment

Funding at the Intersection of Art and Environment: A Field Scan, a report published in 2015 by the Helicon Collaborative and commissioned by Grantmakers in the Arts, provided an early overview of funding at the intersections of arts and environment. The review identified several motivating factors for funders who have implemented strategies for funding arts and environmental work. Some funders have seen an increase in the amount of requests they have received for projects addressing environmental issues, some have come to develop environmental sustainability priorities because the communities they serve are susceptible to environmental issues, and others believe in the power that artists have to influence environmental change and contribute to innovative approaches.

In a Grantmakers in the Arts article, Beyond Environmental Gloom and Doom in the “Golden Age” of Documentary Film, author Melissa Fondakowski explores the rise of documentary film and the efforts made by the Redford Center and the New York Community Trust in funding and promoting the creation of environmental documentary films. For the Redford Center, the idea that hopeful stories and solutions are critical to engaging audience members in environmental issues is at the core of developing funding strategies for environmental films.

In Conclusion

The purpose of the National Arts Policy Roundtable is to provide an open and organic forum for dialogue from which positive change can emerge. We believe that when artists and creative thinkers partner to take on the challenges of critical global issues, the results can be innovative, powerful, and long lasting.

This document is intended as a mere taste of some of the issues that will be addressed. The most exciting aspect of these convenings is to see where the conversation leads us. We look forward to welcoming you.

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Past National Arts Policy Roundtable Topics

Each roundtable has focused on a specific, timely topic and yielded a series of recommendations on public policies and private sector practices, with the goal of moving the issue from thought to action.

2018  Taking History Forward: The Arts as a Door to Dialogue and Change

2017  Re-Animating Democracy: The Arts as a Change Agent in Changing Times

2016  Negotiating the New: Public and Private Sector Support in Changing Times


2014  At the Edge of the Future: Arts and Technology in the 21st Century

2013  Arts and Healing: Mind, Body and Community

2012  Leveraging the Remake: The Role of the Arts in a Shifting Economy

2011  Innovating for Impact: Arts-Based Solutions for a Stronger America

2010  The Role of the Arts in Educating America for Great Leadership and Economic Strength

2009  The Role of the Arts in Strengthening and Inspiring the 21st Century Global Community

2008  The Arts and Civic Engagement: Strengthening the 21st Century Community

2007  The Role of the Arts in Building the 21st Century American Workforce

2006  The Future of Private Giving to the Arts in America
About the National Arts Policy Roundtable

The National Arts Policy Roundtable assembles leaders from business, government, philanthropy, education, and the arts to Sundance every autumn to address issues critical to the advancement of American culture and society. It is a forum for national leaders to discuss timely issues, recommend public policies and private sector initiatives, and to identify research needs.

The National Arts Policy Roundtable was launched in October 2006 by Robert L. Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, and Robert Redford, founder of the Sundance Institute, on the premise that issues important to the arts are also important to society. Since its inception, the Roundtable has convened more than 350 top level decision makers and thought leaders from the fields of business, government, the social sector, education, and the arts in a unique cross sector forum designed to discuss issues—and propose solutions—critical to advancing American culture and vitality. Each Roundtable yields a series of recommendations on public policies and private sector practices that are necessary to move the issue addressed from thought to action. Significant cultural policy achievements in both the private and public sectors have been the result. The findings and recommendations from past Roundtables have been distributed broadly via the Americans for the Arts website, publications and industry journals, op-eds, the media, and through Americans for the Arts’ National Arts Policy Network, which includes more than 5,000 local arts agencies across the country and over 200,000 citizen activists.

For more information, visit AmericansForTheArts.org/napr.

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