



# Is contemporary art effective in spreading awareness of climate change?

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When I was in primary school, one of my first concerns was to save lynxes from extinction. There were no lynxes in the Italian coastal town I used to live in – at the time I thought because they were already extinct there – one more reason to roll up my sleeves.

I then forced my whole family to enroll in a pricey family subscription to WWF, I founded a magazine in my class called “WWF News” and I carefully followed all the suggestions in the Junior Woodchucks Guidebook. On top of that I was making pro-lynxes drawings, and suggested my friends to do the same.

One day one of these friends – not a particularly gifted illustrator I have to say – came to my desk. I had my nose poked in my drawing, trying to depict my lynx in the most realistic way possible. She said: “ You know what? Drawing lynxes won’t save them from extinction.” And then she walked away.

That was a pivotal moment for me. My unquestioned faith in art as a weapon for environmental change gradually shattered. I didn’t renew the WWF Family Subscription for a second year (while my family didn’t complain about it, I was receiving heartbreaking letters from Italian WWF’s director Fulvio Pratesi: “What happened? I thought you were one of us!”). My magazine changed its name to the harmless “Apple Flower”. I left my Junior Woodchucks Guidebook to gather dust. I stopped drawing lynxes for environmental purposes and started drawing disengaged cats instead.

Many years and drawings later, I keep on asking myself the same question. Can art really make the difference when it comes to deal with environmental issues?

The first signs of ecological concern by artists came at the end of the '60s in the form of Land Art. The movement originally wanted to rebel against leaving art in a museum to rot. It was a pure artistic protest in the beginning; what the Land artists wanted to do was to create a kind of art which was impossible to commodify. In order to do that, they started to look at landscape and nature as sites for monumental projects, later called "Earthworks". The respect for the environment and the ecosystem has always been key for these artists, even at a time where environmental issues were not as pressing as they are today.

Art has certainly come a long way from the first Earthworks, and climate change is now top of the agenda with contemporary artists. Their ways of tackling this problem are a lot more diversified compared to the past. Back in the day, it was mostly single artists producing work dealing with "The Earth" in general. Nowadays you can find artists driven by their inspiration as well as artists gathering in groups with specific goals in mind.

Programs like Cape Farewell, for instance, brings together artists, scientists and communicators to create art founded on scientific research. Cape Farewell is an artist led organisation, directed by artist David Buckland. Since the project began, artists have been invited to join expeditions to the Arctic and work on an ongoing program of exhibitions and events. Using creativity to innovate, artists are able to communicate environmental issues on a human scale through science-based art. Cape Farewell's efforts focus on spreading awareness of climate change and creating a vision of a sustainable future.

According to Chantal Bilodeau, playwright and founder of the blog [Artists and Climate Change](#), single artists and organizations approach environmental issues quite differently: "By default I think an organization is less nimble. They are an heavier structure so they have to be channeled, whereas single artists can do pretty much whatever they want so."

Chantal is a firm believer that the arts have a significant role to play in how we move forward in our ever-changing world. After a trip to Alaska she became interested in addressing climate change through her blog and through her work as a playwright: "When I was in Alaska I went to see a glacier. The local people would show me where the glacier was just fifty years before, and now it's retreating so much. Global warming is happening there faster than anywhere else. It was very dramatic. After I came back from that trip, I started watching documentaries and reading about global warming to find out more. Being originally from Canada, I started looking at what's going on there in the first place. That's how the project for the Arctic Cycle started".

The Arctic Cycle is an organization which supports the production of Chantal's cycle of plays exploring the impact of climate change. Through those plays Chantal tells the stories of the people living in the areas more affected by climate change; the eight countries around the Arctic. Her aim is to reduce the psychological distance between individuals and environmental impacts, situating locally both risks and remedial actions.

During the research for this project, Chantal was looking for other artists that would share her same concerns. She then decided to gather all the information about these artists in her blog. When the blog started, in 2012, in the US and in Canada there was only a handful of artists dealing specifically with climate change. Now Chantal reckons their numbers have increased, especially last year: "I think that's because there

has been so much talk about the best way to communicate climate change and different strategies. People are aware that artists have a role to play in that.”

Not everyone agrees on that. Aside from people in complete denial of climate change, there are skeptics raising reasonable doubts. In a Guardian article from 2009, journalist Bibi van der Zee, criticizes Copenhagen’s climate change public art for not being really effective.

Whilst acknowledging the emotional power of the art, she thought that a temporary gut reaction is not enough to induce politicians to change their policies: “Are delegates coming to the exhibitions, being moved by what they see, and heading back to the Bella Centre determined to aim for 40% reductions instead of 30%?” In her words “tears are too easy” and “weeping only takes you so far”.

There certainly are several problems connected to environmentally engaged art. The first is that, among contemporary art’s many qualities, straightforwardness doesn’t enlist. When art pushes a political agenda, it usually comes out as dull propaganda. (Then propaganda can also have its own charm, look at the revaluation of social realism, but that’s another story).

One more problem is: should art limit itself to spread awareness about an issue or should it also suggest the solution?

According to Chantal Bilodeau, there is room for everyone: “Some artists are very abstract and they are responding to feelings, while some other artists are more on the advocacy side, trying to inspire people to take action. Artists deal with situations in whatever way work for them. Culture affects people in very mysterious way, and being hit over the head with a message doesn’t always work. Sometimes if you just get a hint of somebody’s concern in their art, it can work on you. If you see climate change reflected everywhere it becomes part of your life, instead of being this big thing you are supposed to deal with. It’s just like: oh, this is where we are now.”

Chantal doesn’t think that one piece of art is going to change what corporations are doing. She instead thinks that by adding drops into the bucket, at some point there will be a tipping point. With art that’s not necessarily measurable though.

One thing I already felt – even though I wasn’t able to articulate it when drawing lynxes in primary school – is that art isn’t utilitarian. Expecting it to be is to miss the whole point.

Artists’ work create a pool of research and opinions for further exploration. In this sense, art is rather the litmus test for human activity. Looking back through history, art has never caused immediate change, but it has always inspired it.