



Exhibition

Modern art stinks

From April 18–25, 2018, the courtyard at Somerset House, London, UK, played host to a unique exhibit. Five geodesic domes, 6 m wide and 3 m tall, were arranged in a circle and connected by short corridors. The frame was Norwegian spruce and the body PVC. The installation shimmered on the concrete, looking a little like a modernist igloo village. But if the aesthetic hinted at habitation, the atmosphere, at least in four of the rooms, was anything but hospitable.

The aim of Michael Pinsky's Pollution Pods is to replicate "nuanced polluted environments which contain varying levels of ozone, particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, and carbon monoxide". The pods were first exhibited last summer in Trondheim, Norway, and the entrance room represents Tautra, a small island a few kilometres north of the city. The air is crisp with a discernible plasticky tang given off by the PVC. The next room represents London, UK, with a sickly smell of diesel that catches at the back of the throat—your correspondent sneezed twice.

New Delhi follows; it is extremely hot and extremely hazy. One instinctively blinks. The smell is hard to define, but it is a vile brew. People do not linger in this pod. Beijing is next; it is cooler and the air is filled with an acrid odour, redolent of some noxious mix of chemicals. Finally, Saõ Paulo. The heat is once again unbearable and the smell is slightly sweet, but not altogether unpleasant. The corridor from Saõ Paulo leads back to Tautra, a journey of 10 877 km covered in three or four footsteps.

The smell is generated by headspace technology, a technique that involves analysing the composition of a particular environment and recreating the odour by use of harmless chemicals. The temperature is controlled by air conditioning and refrigeration units, and a smoke machine generates the haze. A computer screen displays real-time conditions for each of the cities and as visitors leave they are invited to fill out a questionnaire on the artwork and the environment.

The pods are the culmination of Climart, a 4-year project by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology exploring how the visual arts can influence people's attitudes to climate change. Christian Klöckner is the project leader: "We spend a lot of time thinking about how to communicate with people about environmental issues and we seem to run into walls if we just use scientific reports; nobody reads them and nobody gets moved by them", he explains. "Art can engage people in a different way; it is a much more personal experience". Klöckner's team hope to elucidate the psychological effects of climate change-related art. The research will form the basis of two PhD projects. The idea of a piece that offered a physical experience was central to the project. "We wanted people to be able to feel something on their body", said Klöckner. Pinsky's work was chosen from 150 applicants.

"The Norwegians have an incredible amount of wealth that is generated from the exploitation of fossil fuels; that then goes into a cycle where they can buy products from China at very reasonable prices. But they are still living in a relatively pristine environment, whereas the people who are producing the goods are living in dreadful conditions with massive pollution problems", Pinsky told *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. "I wanted to make that connection; we have to look at how the process of ever-expanding production is also a cause of pollution".

Western consumerism is an important driver of global pollution, but it is not the only one. The olfactory assault of the pods highlights some of the other issues at play. For example, the New Delhi dome recreates the choking smell of burning crops and the odour in the Saõ Paulo dome simulates the ethanol used for transportation.

So far, the pods have only been exhibited in Norway and the UK, although the organisers hope to take them further afield. Things have not consistently gone to plan. "The pods are designed to work in temperatures of up to 21°C, so in London I did not want to show them any later than April, when the average temperature is around 11°C", explains Pinsky. But Thursday, April 19, the second day of the installation, was the warmest April day the UK had seen in 70 years; the courtyard of Somerset House reached 33°C. "The New Delhi pod is meant to be hot, but on the Thursday, it was mindblowingly hot", said Pinsky. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* visited the following day, which was only slightly cooler. So the temperature, which is typically the easiest element to simulate, went awry—although this scarcely detracted from the experience.

Somerset House is situated on the Strand, a major thoroughfare and one of the most polluted parts of the city. The London pod attests to how readily people become inured to filthy air. "In Trondheim, the London dome seemed really very polluted", points out Klöckner. "But in London, it did not seem so bad".

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Michael Pinsky: Pollution Pods

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<https://www.somersetthouse.org.uk/whats-on/michael-pinsky-pollution-pods>