

# Art for change

The next wave: empowering global change

In the grounds of London's Somerset House in the spring of 2018, five interconnected geodesic domes were installed with a powerful message. The Pollution Pods, created by award-winning British environmental artist Michael Pinsky, simulated the air conditions from different parts of the world. Visitors began their "journey" in the first pod in Tautra, a coastal region in Norway, breathing in fresh Nordic air, fragranced with ocean salt and pine trees. They continued through to the cities of London, New Delhi, Beijing and São Paulo, some of which suffer high rates of air pollution, confronted by a thick fog scented with burnt rubber and transport fumes.

The installation drew tens of thousands of visitors. They were interviewed on the way out and reported feelings of anger and sadness, with an increased awareness of air quality across the globe.

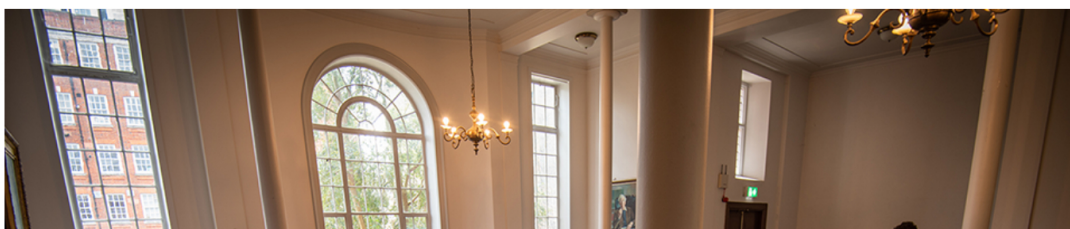
The accompanying study, a four-year scientific project conducted by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, entitled Climart, proved that art can be a powerful tool in changing people's perception, understanding and behaviour towards climate change.

Pinsky is part of a wider movement of artists responding to the threat of climate change with their work. In the lead-up to the international UN Climate Change Conference COP26 taking place in Glasgow in November 2021, a youth-led movement of creative responses to climate change is picking up steam. Reaching out through visual arts, theatre, interactive and social media, embedded with sustainability as a core ethos, is vital to promote awareness about the climate crisis among the youth, says Alison Barrett MBE, project director, The Climate Connection, British Council.

"Young people are at the centre of this collaborative approach, as we support them to gain the skills and networks to participate in meaningful dialogue and bring about real change for our planet," she says.

While the most visible solutions to climate change can come from top-down governmental policy, creative grassroots responses are also important in terms of spreading awareness, capturing a movement and garnering a wider following.

Take this summer's London Sinfonietta Orchestra performance of Houses Slide written by 35-year-old composer Laura Bowler. Designed to highlight climate change, the performance premiered at the Royal Festival Hall and had its lights, sound amplification and energy requirements entirely powered by 16 on-stage volunteer-powered bicycles. Soprano soloist Jessica Aszodi sang from her bicycle while pedalling to keep the lights on.







Julie's Bicycle: We Make Tomorrow, based at Somerset House as part of a resident community of creative enterprises and organisations. Credit: Ben Darlington

Others are going even further, with the conviction that artists, museums and festivals should be united as off-grid beacons for change. Julie's Bicycle is a non-profit set up by Alison Tickell in 2007 to help creative industries reduce their impact on the planet. "The creative industries are a powerful mobilising force that influence behavioural change," she says. "The arts have often been a weathervane for society. What we value is often mediated through outlets such as fashion and music. It's often how we identify ourselves, particularly for young people."

Julie's Bicycle has worked with theatres and music festivals, handing a badge to those with a commitment to sustainability. For example, the Wide Awake festival in London has pledged to use biofuel and eco-toilets, and ban single-use plastics.

"Designers, artists and arts organisations are rethinking how they work and there is a great deal of hunger across the arts and culture to take action on climate change and speak out," Tickell says.

The British Council is another institution which believes that the arts is key in communicating the message of sustainability, most recently commissioning 17 artistic projects in the fields of art, science and digital technology. Unveiled ahead of COP26, the commissions are being developed as part of the British Council's programme The Climate Connection, which aims to bring people – in particular the youth – around the world together to help meet the challenges of climate change. Education and school outreach programmes are integral in this aim to engage younger people with future solutions for the planet.



South Roots International group cleaning the Zeekoevlei in Cape Town as an active response to Phone Call to the World webinar on environmental justice. Credit: Sue-Livia van Wyk

One such project, called Phone Call to the World, produced by the Scottish Youth Theatre in partnership with Indra Congress, offered young artists from five countries to perform and record an "emergency call" to Mother Earth which was uploaded into an interactive Google Earth Map. This formed the groundwork for other environmental and educational projects around the world. "The project is already galvanising young people to make change and raise awareness in other areas, giving them a platform to share their work and be heard at international level," says Mahri





Living-Language-Land: Reflecting on the marks of the sardaks - ancestors and owners of the land - Changthang region of Ladakh, India. Credit: Padma Rigzin

Living-Language-Land is another project that explores the loss of minority languages in relation to land and nature as a result of habitat destruction. Working across social media, the project releases one word a week for 26 weeks leading up to COP26 from 26 July, 2021. The contributions to the project come from more than 16 countries and nearly 20 languages, from Mauritius to Western Australia, Ladakh to Wales. Their first word will be *ie cho* from the Muisca language, originating from modern-day Colombia, meaning living the good path in harmony with nature. "We hope that people reflect differently on their relationship to the planet in the light of learning about these words," says creative producer Philippa Bayley.



Living-Language-Land: Fresh shoots on Noongar territory, Western Australia. Credit: Neville Gabie

For Michael Pinsky, whose goal with Pollution Pods and other subsequent work was to inspire people to critically think about their car usage, the project has been a success. In the run-up to COP26, the Pollution Pods are on tour, starting in King's Cross then splitting up in separate domes to visit cities on the way up to Glasgow and then reuniting in Glasgow again on 31 October or 1 November.

A group of doctors from Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children will make the same journey on bikes, visiting the domes at each stop to hold events. They are lobbying to make areas around city centre hospitals low-traffic neighbourhoods so children's lungs are not damaged when they visit hospital.






Pollution Pods: an installation in the courtyard of London's working arts centre, Somerset House. Credit: Peter Macdiarmid for Somerset House

"Using air-pollution art as a medium to talk about climate change is much more effective than showing a picture of a cracking glacier," says Pinsky. "It gets people to reflect on how it impacts their day-to-day lives."

Alison Barrett MBE at the British Council's The Climate Connection agrees that the arts can, crucially, make climate action as inclusive as possible. "By reaching beyond the usual climate change circles to bring new voices from the arts... to the table," she says. "Especially young people – [can help] ensure leaders and policymakers understand the needs and concerns of those most affected by the climate crisis."

If art can inspire change at this level, the opportunities for creative responses, imagination, solutions and ideas to tackle climate change on a wider scale are endless. And at this urgent moment for the planet, they can't come soon enough.

\*Main image credit: Peter Macdiarmid for Somerset House

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