

# Remember when contemporary art solved the climate crisis?

BY SEAN RASPET

*In 2020, the Point examines how our cultural and sociopolitical systems are implicated in climate change, and what actions the arts industry can take. In this excerpt of an essay published online by AAP, Sean Raspet discusses art-world greenwashing.*

Not every artwork needs to be about the climate crisis. Nor should it be. That being said, with a recent, sharp increase in climate change as a topic for artworks and exhibitions, it is necessary to address a sizable gap in the typical perceptions of what a climate-crisis-themed project does and what it *is* physically, chemically, and functionally—and, as a result, its material effects on the atmosphere. Climate change is, after all, a large-scale physicochemical problem. It is an accumulating flow of gaseous carbon that is immune to our individually held thoughts, beliefs, hopes, and fears. It is responsive to (and constituted by) humankind's material activities on a collective, planetary scale.

At the root of the gap between an artwork's imagined and actual effects is, perhaps, a more general tendency to confuse artworks that are about something for being the thing itself. For example, a painting that is *about* a historically effective political protest movement may become rhetorically confused with *being* an effective political protest, despite its present-day context, format, and reception. In many ways this disjuncture ultimately arises from contemporary art's tendency to imagine itself as separate from society's mode of production at large—often to the point of being unable to see its own position within that system. Slippery and imprecise language, such as in statements about how a project “tackles,” “confronts,” “addresses,” or “combats” climate change, can further muddle the divide between the perception-of and the actual material exigency of a work.

Artworks are products and features of our present-day carbon-emitting mode of production. Our “fossil capitalism” production system and economic organization of society is the source of the climate crisis, and any effective climate-related endeavor—artwork or otherwise—must act upon and affect this site. The tendency for disavowal of the material-economic-chemical conditions of an artwork in favor of its stated message allows for the art-world equivalent of greenwashing. Similar to corporate or political greenwashing, this stifles and obfuscates paths toward actually significant systemic change and points of productive intervention into material conditions (as well as, I would argue, paths toward more interesting art). We should be honest with ourselves that within the current system of material production, most artworks are net emitters by a large margin. The more “heroic” in scale an artwork is, generally the larger the source of emissions it is, and this fact cannot be offset by an encoded climate-related message.

Much has been written of the inherent contradictions of Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014), and while I'm not aiming to pile on,



the work is an instructive example of the perceptual gaps of our present moment. The project entailed the transportation of several heavy ice fragments from the Greenland ice sheet to three cities in Europe, where the public could watch them melt. In this process, it produced a large amount of greenhouse gas emissions—largely due to the refrigerated shipping of the ice chunks across significant distances. Probably anticipating some criticism regarding the project's resource footprint, Eliasson commissioned a carbon-accounting analysis from the London-based organization Julie's Bicycle for the project's Paris iteration. This version produced an estimated 30 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent: small in comparison to the world's total carbon emissions, but as a single artwork, it may have been one of

the most heavily carbon-emitting projects made during that decade, especially when counting the impact of all three of its presentations.

Ironically, I would argue that the work's primary positive contribution is in its carbon accounting—a concrete step that allowed for the registration of the physical and ecological costs that came with the conceptual gesture's realization—something that very few projects have done. However, the issue of whether the work may have effectively raised awareness of the climate crisis, reaching a public and changing minds, thus presumably also leading to actual, material action, remains debatable. There may have been a historical window where raising awareness on the issue of climate change via artworks was a relevant endeavor. However, today, the public is generally cognizant of the existence of climate change and the need for it to urgently “be addressed” (or is likely otherwise in denial and not amenable to statements coded in the format of contemporary artworks). The media already thoroughly discusses the topic. And indeed, the climate itself does a far better job at raising awareness: despite the multitude of climate-related artworks at the 2019 Venice Biennale, for example, the floods in the city were undeniably more effective in making tangible the perils of climate change than any contemporary art display.

Projects predicated on the value of raising awareness are symptoms of a present-day failure to connect the dots between the art system and our fossil-fuel-powered modes of capitalist production—the material-chemical basis from which artworks arise. They speak to a desperate desire for art to remain relevant in a time of rapidly shifting frameworks and an increasing likelihood of near-future social and ecological collapse. We can't solve the climate crisis through the same economic system that produced it. We don't need an additional quantity of art objects and exhibitions produced by the existing order. Rather, we need artists (and everyone) to help create entirely new systems.

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