

Can art change minds about climate change?



As a marketer, I am well versed in the power of storytelling to breathe life into your brand. But, how might multimodal storytelling engage society with the climate and ecological emergency we currently face as a species? As an artist interested in how our perception of being in, knowing and belonging in the world affects our ecological awareness and ecological thinking, I was keen to hear the expert panel's views.

The panel workshop, *Climate Change and Culture* was the third in the series of themes, exploring 'creativity, empathy and stewardship' in the Fourth industrial revolution. The one-day symposium and exhibition, organised by the [StoryLab Research Institute](#) at [Anglia Ruskin University](#) (ARU), used the intersection between creativity and technology as an opportunity to discuss new forms of storytelling¹.

According to a recent study on emotional reactions to artworks at the ArtCOP21 climate change festival, very few artworks made people feel like they were able to do something about climate change. The study surveyed 874 visitors reactions to the works on view and researchers were able to divide the show into four categories: "*the comforting utopia*," "*the challenging dystopia*," "*the mediocre mythology*," and "*the awesome solution*." Surprisingly, the researchers concluded that environmental art should move away from a dystopian way of depicting the problems of climate change, towards offering solutions, and emphasising the beauty and interconnectedness of nature. It's a difficult task, the researchers say, but if a work of art manages to strike the right balance of emotions, artists do "*have the potential to retell the stories of climate change in a way that activates the slumbering potential in our societies*."²

Antarctica is the fastest warming place on earth, its datasets are at the heart of climate science and the understanding of our global systems. The first speaker from the United Kingdom Antarctic Heritage Trust (UKAHT), Camilla Nicoll, took us on a virtual-tour of this remote but globally

resonant environment; that most of us will never have the opportunity to experience first-hand. Camilla shared UKAHT's work using photogrammetry, to obtain reliable information about the historic huts they look after from the heroic era of polar exploration (1943-75). The purpose of this project was initially to support their practical conservation efforts in a hostile environment but latterly as an opportunity for public engagement.

Next, initially filming banners and protests associated with the ecological and climatic emergency we face, filmmaker Fiona Cunningham-Reid has resolved to tell the story of the Extinction Rebellion movement through the lens of artist-activists Ackroyd & Harvey. Documenting Grass coats at London Fashion week and the Culture declares emergency initiative; Fiona's film provides an engaging alternative narrative on the campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience.

I was well versed in the term 'ecological anxiety', but the third speaker, Flora Graham, tackled the subject of communication in a time of 'ecological grief'. Taking on the perspective of front-line scientists in our ecological crisis, Flora reflected on the human impact of being the caretaker of the very last one or 'endling'. In this era of no hope, Flora quoted the climate scientist, Kate Marvel: "*We need courage, not hope. Grief, after all, is the cost of being alive...*" It's clear that a dispassionate delivery of the facts doesn't have much effect on the population and so scientists are now trying to engage their personal narrative, to bolster the factual information they publish. I would strongly recommend signing up to Flora's regular *Nature briefings*.

Final speakers on the panel, Mike Faulkner and Paul Mumford introduced us to their immersive film; Powers of X and the Relative Value of Things in the Ecoverse. Based on the film by Charles and Ray Eames', Powers of Ten and the Relative Size of Things in the Universe (1968 & 1977), Power of X explores our planet's environmental fragility and man-made climate breakdown. While the Eameses' film was framed by a new perspective on the earth from Apollo 8's earthrise moment, "...we now see the world through Google earth" says Mike.

The resulting interdisciplinary discussion acknowledged the role of storytelling in the climate crisis. It explored the relative benefits of the traditional linear approach and the non-linear approach to storytelling and the opportunity to engage audiences using new media. But, whatever the approach, fundamental to the narrative is a trust in the storyteller and a connection with the protagonist - be that Al Gore or Greta Thunberg. One sobering reflection was the anthropocentric lens through which we view our role in communicating information about climate change and discussion ensued about other than human perspectives in the network, from a sociological perspective.

My take home message from the panel: We need to get emotional to communicate messages to different audiences and artists are good at emotion. So let's get emotional!

To find out more about the StoryLab Research Institute and upcoming events visit: <http://www.storylabresearch.com/>. The symposium was organised in conjunction with an exhibition in the Ruskin gallery, for more information about the accompanying exhibition see the catalogue available at: <http://storylabresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-11-07-Storytelling-in-the-Fourth-Industrial-Revolution-Exhibition-catalogue.pdf>

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References

¹ Storylab, 2019. Storytelling in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Symposium (26th November) and Exhibition (7th – 28th November), Ruskin Gallery, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

² Sommer, L. K., and Klockner, C. A., 2019. Does activist art have the capacity to raise awareness in audiences? – A study on climate change art at the ArtCOP21 event in Paris. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*. doi: 10.1037/aca0000247.supp (Supplemental).