

**Climate Disaster and Art:
Artists reacting and responding to
climate disaster**

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The exhibition *Sounds of the Blue Marble: Mourning the Anthropocene*, organized by the Seoul National University Museum of Art in 2021, asks questions about the diverse spectrums of artistic reactions and responses to various crises caused by climate change. This article focuses on artists' responses and warnings concerning climate disaster, and responses of art to the situation of refugees in the aftermath of such disaster.

Today climate change is a global phenomenon. Tsunamis due to heat waves, drought and floods, and excessive carbon emissions caused by industrial development have presented problems such as global warming and reduction of polar glaciers. The long-accumulated potential for major disaster for humankind has been constantly signaled through diverse media and channels. Such messages are evident in Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which tells of forests where birds no longer sing; and photographer George Osodi's (1974-) photographic composition depicting disasters in Africa caused by transnational corporations' development of oil. NASA recently warned that major cities of the world could be submerged due to rising sea levels, and Harald Welzer (1958-) has noted that devastation of the Earth is taking place much more rapidly than anyone anticipated, warning that wars could break out due to climate disaster. What is common among the diverse views on the absolute crisis of climate disaster is the sense of urgency for humankind to respond to the crisis together, and the recognition that this is a global issue, not one limited to individual states.

Increasing numbers of artists are working on the theme of climate disaster, attempting to provide alternative strategies to mediate climate issues, and highlighting the common concern and need for action by everyone. In his comments on the environment issue, philosopher Felix Guattari (1930-1992) said one of the best ways to solve the crisis would be the way of the artist. Thus, we will consider the various directions presented by contemporary artists regarding the complex issues linked to the climate crisis, and their strategies of response.^{1]}

Climate Disasters and Art

Artistic responses to climate disasters have been taking place in various countries since long ago. In the United States, artists who escape from traditional art museum space to work in nature have increased rapidly in number since the first lunar landing of a satellite, and have contributed to cultivating the new genre known as ecological art. These artists have tried to show that humans and nature are in symbiotic relationship; however, as seen in the case of Michael Heizer's (1944-) *Double Negative*, some received the criticism that their installations for nature protection were actually damaging it. In Germany, sociologist Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) published a book containing his critical perceptions of environmental change,^{2]} while Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) planted 7,000 trees for the Kassel Dokumenta in 1982 based on his interest in ecology, thus taking a leading role in art's response to the environmental issues of humankind through his "social sculptures." In the United Kingdom, the Turner Prize was offered to Richard Long (1945-), who photographed the traces of his work process as he personally experienced nature, reflecting the nation's deep interest in preservation of the natural environment. Hence, the artists who left the traditional art museum to enter nature attempted a conceptual transition of art while presenting artistic responses to disaster.

In 1990, as the world was progressing into a single entity through globalization, some artists began to occupy the city. They carried out their projects in the city, providing material to the public to induce their participation, and leading the experience. Such phenomena caught the eyes of Nicolas Bourriaud (1965-), who saw one of the important changes of contemporary art in the late 20th century as "relations." In *Relational Aesthetics*, he wrote that what mattered in contemporary art was interrelations through participation of the public, and that such works of mutual subjectivity were completed in urban spaces because they were perceived as the spaces most preferred by installation artists and participants.^{3]}

Another artist who linked the issue of climate disaster to "relations" in the urban space was Hermann Josef

1] Felix Guattari, *Drei Oekologien*, Wien, 1994, pp. 12-13.

2] Herbert Marcuse, *Die eindimensionale Mensch*, Darmstadt/Newwied, 1987, p. 86.

3] Bourriaud, N., *Relational Aesthetics*, Jiyeon Hyun, trans. (Mijinsa, 2011), p. 7, 22-28.

Hack (1956-). On encountering the news that the small island of Tuvalu in the South Pacific would be submerged under the sea due to global warming, Hack initiated his performance *Global Balance* (2009) in a city square, to inform the public about the gravity of climate disaster. The only tool he required was a level (Wasser Waggen). Participants of the performance joined together with levels in their hands, connecting the bubble levels with each other. While enjoying the event like a game, the participants formed a common bond, and the performance presented a certain direction in which people must move to cope jointly with imminent climate disaster.^{4]} Instead of waiting for spectators at the art museum, Hack went out to the plaza to persuade people in person, transforming passive spectators into active participants, thus completing the change of relations as an artistic example of “relational aesthetics.” The Chancellor at the time, G. Shroeder, called it “joint responsibility for ourselves,” admitting responsibility for climate change and publicizing the significance of that role.

Olafur Eliasson (1967-), who works with the pain of climate disaster in mutual subjective relations, has presented the series *Ice Watch* since 2014. *Ice Watch* involves installing lumps of ice, directly brought by the artist from Greenland, in the public square of the nation hosting the world climate change conference, during the period of that conference. The lumps of ice placed in front of the Tate Gallery of Modern Art and the surrounding plazas in 2019 have since been melting and bubbling. Eliasson encourages spectators to touch, kiss and smell the ice, saying, “The climate disaster is too abstract, literally something in our heads. I simply want to move the stories about the climate from our heads to our bodies. I believe it is important that people actually place their ears against the ice and realize the subtle yet sudden sounds of breaking. That is because the noises of melting are in fact the discharge of pressure foam that has been locked away in the ice for 10,000 years.^{5]} Thus he stressed his intention to have people participate, experience and awaken their senses. He planned his work so that spectators could be fully immersed in the work, without any supplementary devices such as lights or fog lamps. Following his enticement of spectator contemplation through earlier works, installing an

artificial rainbow and an artificial sun in *Beauty* (1993) and *Climate Project* respectively, *Ice Watch* induced humane sentimental exchange through experience, rather than artistic empathy.

Among climate disaster projects, an installation that received both praise and criticism was the Lithuanian opera *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, which got the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Biennale of 2019.^{6]} First shown at the Lithuanian National Museum of Art in 2017, *Sun & Sea* was performed again in Venice with 24 performers appearing on an indoor artificial beach. They enjoy their holiday on the beach, going about their daily activities, sunbathing, reading, listening to music, conversing and making phone calls, sometimes harmonizing in solos or groups. The opera performers are diverse, from children to elderly people, thus reflecting the diverse yet ordinary coastal landscape. Spectators go up to the balcony in order to appreciate the installation/opera.

While this vacation season performance received highest praise at the Venice Biennale, it also indirectly revealed various causes of carbon emission increase, such as the cell phones, sunblock and other industrial items carried by the performers. Furthermore, there was strong criticism of the use of airplanes by the performers and tourists who participated in this famous world exhibition. Since all means of public transportation to Venice emitted massive amounts of carbon and carbon dioxide, the biennale and its associated international art business looked to environmental activists like an exhibition of carbon emissions. Aware that the greatest problem related to climate disaster is carbon emission, various artists have produced works involving carbon reduction. Austrian artist Jeschaunig Marcus's *Oasis No. 8* (2016) was a project that supplied waste heat to a cooling system in the field to create transparent natural greenhouses in the empty spaces between or in buildings. The installation was an attempt both to assist the city in energy development, and to redesign the exteriors of architecture. The work was recognized not only as visual art in a public space, but also as an installation representing successful interdisciplinary connection between natural science and architecture; thus it won the Grand Prize at a competitive event on climate change in Austria.

4] Kim, Hyang-Sook, “Disasters and Artistic Response: Hermann Josef Hack’s Climate Refugee Project,” *The Korean Society of Art Theories*, 2012/Vol. 14., pp. 53-83, pp. 69-70.

5] <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/12/12/ice-watch-olafur-eliasson-installation/>

6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_%26_Sea_\(Marina\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_%26_Sea_(Marina))

Environmental activists have proposed that all global exhibitions including biennales and expos should be banned. Though for now the whole world is on temporary hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, things will soon be resumed, and we can imagine what will happen next. Several globally influential art museums in Switzerland, France and Germany have begun to act on this proposal. For example, Germany decided to reduce its number of art exhibitions according to the green new deal policy "Wir alle für 1.5°C" in 2019, aimed at reducing carbon emissions by 30% by the year 2030.^{7]}

Climate Disaster and Climate War

Harald Welzer (1958-) is a scholar who has concretely revealed the view that the climate disaster issue is not simply a matter of climate, but a complex issue interlinked with political society and globalization. In the foreword of his book *Climate Wars* he expressed concern and interest in the fact that climate change has reached the dangerous extent of threatening national security, as reflected in studies such as "National Security and the Crisis of Climate Change," published in the US, and in the statement "Climate policy Is Security Policy," presented by the German government's Academic Consulting Committee for Global Environmental Change.^{8]}

Welzer understood that the increase of the Earth's average temperature by 2 degrees or 4 degrees is not connected in any way with the climate system per se, but that in fact the situation is a complex interweaving of more fundamental issues. He also claimed that the increase of refugees due to climate change could be linked to potential violence, presenting the case of the Darfur region in Sudan. The genocide that occurred in Darfur in 2003 was reported as a racial conflict between Arabs and Africans, but according to Welzer the crucial cause of the conflict was changes in the ecosystem due to erosion of earth caused by climate change. It was the result of a chain reaction, as farmers whose livelihoods were threatened due to destruction of the ecosystem had to relocate and consequently clashed with their neighbors.

Welzer has informed us, through his research on the

movement of refugees, that due to globalization the climate issue is no longer simply a matter of the weather, but is interwoven with compound cause-and-effect relations, including issues of race, religion and resources. Consequently, even if a single state is in danger, this could influence the surrounding countries as well, and even cause collapse due to a domino effect. Therefore, if we do not cope with the climate disaster and refugee issues, there will ultimately be war that could destroy humankind. Welzer referred to today's murders as "ecological genocide."^{9]} Gwynne Dyer (1943-) also expressed concern in the book *Climate Wars* that war could break out in the next 10 to 20 years on account of climate change.^{10]}

During the general assembly of the 15th UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2009, the International Organization for Migration presented a report predicting the appearance of up to one billion refugees by 2050 due to climate change. It warned that about 10% of the world's population would cross borders due to damages from climate change, and that such a massive increase in refugees would cause severe social conflict and political chaos. US journalist David Wallace-Wells predicted a dark future in his book *The Uninhabitable Earth*, saying that if we do not prepare for climate disaster, we will no longer be able to live on Earth. The core of the climate refugee problem is that even though the poor countries and their people are in no way responsible for climate change, their very survival is threatened as they face life as wandering refugees.

Climate Refugees and Art's Response

Today there is widespread awareness that climate refugees are neither a personal nor a regional issue, but an issue concerning everyone in the world. Numerous recent studies in Europe and the United States have shown that the sudden increase in refugees is linked to climate disaster, and each country is working to find measures to deal with such refugee issues. However, few countries welcome refugees, and even if they do accept them, their numbers and criteria for entry are strictly limited. Ecological architect Vincent Callebaut (1977-

7] <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/monopol-talk-clubhouse-kunst-und-klimaschutz-was-sich-aendern-muss>

8] Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars*, Younglim Cardinal, 2010, p. 6.

9] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

10] Gwynne Dyer, *Climate Wars*, Gimmyoung Publishers, 2011, p. 15.

), in response to the issue of climate refugees' survival, presented various types of architecture that would enable life on the sea, including the floating city, *Lilypad, a floating ecopolis for climate refugees* (2010).

Hack, who came out into the urban space shouting, "Only art can stop climate change," presents three directions of artistic countermeasures related to climate refugees. First, he installs a *Refugee Camp* in a public square. This work consists of hundreds of large and small tents made with recycled material, on which is written, "This is a refugee camp. Occupied." Though simple, this expression is a clear symbolic, artistic response to the imminent refugee issue. The artist has travelled throughout the world, to areas including France, Greece, South America and Beijing, China, to communicate with the public about the urgency of refugee relief, through installation art and slogans with the message "Do not fight the refugees; fight the cause of refugees."^{11]} The reason Hack continuously urges people's participation through his installations is that "participatory art" influences everyone, regardless of its artistic success or failure.^{12]} His second response to help the refugees is the use of a platform. As founder of the Global Brainstorming Project (GBP), Hack uses art as a channel for mutual communication among researchers, scientists and the general public. This is construction of a communal system based on the idea that not only artists and spectators, but also specialists like researchers and scientists must participate in solving the issue of climate disaster.^{13]} The GBP is a powerful means to gather participants and provide information for global performances such as *Global Switch* (all lights out for five minutes), through a network. His third response is a performance of baking and distributing bread to refugees, who are starving under globalization. Hack uses slogans related to capitalism to inform people of his mission, such as "Art collectors, where does your capital come from?" and "The price of art is rising. The glaciers are melting. This response is his religious practice based on his Christian background."^{14]}

Hack's refugee project shows that such an endeavor can only be completed by including social and political issues, and with the help of many participants. In the process of encouraging participants and globalizing

the project, Hack ultimately joined the pioneers of Nomadism, a new genre of contemporary art. Hack is an optimist, and according to his views, even though the perpetrators and victims are all human, social disasters can be avoided through community effort, and the climate disaster we are experiencing can also be overcome.^{15]} As to why artists must pay attention to refugees, Hack argues that everyone else is remaining silent about their situation as victims of continuous neglect in terms of food and health, and that this will ultimately make them vulnerable to massacres.^{16]}

Responses of Refugee Artists and Art Museums

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Switzerland provided opportunities for the suffering refugees of the world (including climate disaster refugees) to paint pictures as a means to reconstruct their identities damaged due to trauma, through themes such as "Art Stands with Refugee Women" in 2019, and "Art Stands with Refugee Children" in 2020. In the foreword to the project's book, artist and curator Alfredo Jaar (1956-) pointed out that "half of the world's refugees are women and children," and the project was organized to inform the world about their pain and unequal treatment, thus encouraging people to participate in refugee relief.^{17]} The refugees' works were shown at Art Basel, celebrating World Refugee Day, and the exhibition was held not only in the art museum but also in the streets, offering the indifferent public an opportunity to empathize with the art. Meanwhile, Odri Cabelius's photographs enable us to better understand the refugees' reality through images of young children who came to Switzerland on their own, and adults. In the short documentary film *What They Took with Them – List*, spectators can see what the refugees exerted all their strength to save. As we look at their lists, we can compare them to our travel packing lists, and contemplate on the question of what we would take if we had to flee. Bouchra Khalili (1975-) reveals, through *Sea as Sky*, the crucial importance of the stars during refugees' difficult journey of escape. Through their works, the refugees inform the public about their circumstances under violent banishment from their lands, and send their messages requesting help and solidarity.

11] <http://hermann-josef-hack.de/cms/>

12] Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, pp. 180-212.

13] <http://hermann-josef-hack.de/cms/?cat=15>

14] Kim, Hyangsook, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-74.

15] Hermann Josef Hack, "Globale Soziale Plastik", in: *Aktionsraum Kunst*, 01. 2011, p. 12.

16] Kim, Hyangsook, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-74.,

17] <https://www.unhcr.org/dach/ch-de/aktuelles/art-stands-refugees/art-stands-with-refugees-en>

Different states are also coming up with diverse ideas to manage the increasing refugee situation; for example, in 2020 the Hamburger Kunsthalle Museum in Hamburg, Germany organized a special lottery exhibition.^{18]}

A total of 100 world-renowned artists, photographers and designers, including O. Eliasson of Denmark, J. Holzer of the United States, and A. Kiefer of Germany, voluntarily participated, showing their dedication by donating their sketches and works. Under the title *Heart-100 Artist*, the works were shown in turn for two weeks, in collaboration with the contemporary art museums of Bonn, Hamburg and Berlin. Individuals wanting to help refugees were to donate 40 euros, and after the show was over a lottery would take place in which one of the exhibited works could be won. Through this event, one could enjoy the double effect of doing a good deed and also having the opportunity to obtain a work of art.

Such responses of artists to the pending task of dealing with climate refugees has brought the world's attention to the matter through their diverse work, creating a field for debate. Moreover, they have raised awareness on the causes, countermeasures and various methods of response through the global internet, as they travel the world practicing nomadism. The artists believe that so long as we genuinely acknowledge that every Earth being is a "potential refugee," and make efforts to prevent this, the future of the "Blue Marble" is not so dark after all.

^{18]} <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/heart-100-artist-1-mission>