

# “Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication” A Review and Participant-Voiced Poetic Inquiry

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The following is a review, participant-voiced poetic inquiry, and commentary on the article, “Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication: Experiencing the Reality of Climate Change and Leading the Way to Change.” Liselotte Roosen and Christian Klockner (2020) published this case study as part of a more extensive research project, Climart, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. In this review, I consider the relationships between artworks, researchers, and audience participants. I offer a participant-voiced poetic inquiry of the arts-based research project. I address the project’s goals for social/political/cultural change, its local and global contexts, and future implications.

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## “ART AND DOCUMENTARIES IN CLIMATE COMMUNICATION”: A REVIEW AND PARTICIPANT-VOICED POETIC INQUIRY

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**Abstract:** The following is a review, participant-voiced poetic inquiry, and commentary on the article, “Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication: Experiencing the Reality of Climate Change and Leading the Way to Change.” Liselotte Roosen and Christian Klockner (2020) published this case study as part of a more extensive research project, Climart, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. In this review, I consider the relationships between artworks, researchers, and audience participants. I offer a participant-voiced poetic inquiry of the arts-based research project. I address the

project's goals for social/political/cultural change, its local and global contexts, and future implications.

**Keywords:** climate change; documentary; poetic inquiry; social change; visual art; review

## Overview

The following is a review, participant-voiced poetic inquiry, and commentary on the futures-facing, arts-based case study, “Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication: Experiencing the Reality of Climate Change and Leading the Way to Change” by Liselotte Roosen and Christian Klockner (2020). “Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication” was published as part of a larger international, transdisciplinary research project, *Climart*<sup>1</sup>. The case study was funded by the Norwegian Research Council and conducted in 2017 in Brighton, UK. It is based on an arts-based research (ABR) project, which asked participant audience members at an art gallery to explore characteristics of two visual forms of climate communication. Urgency around the state of environmental mass destruction is increasingly driving interdisciplinary scholarship that blurs the boundaries of art and science. In this ABR project, visual artworks and a documentary film are explored in terms of their perceived effectiveness at triggering climate concern, eliciting engagement, and sparking desire to change behavior in pro-environmental ways. This synergy between science and art conveys public messages about the need for pro-environmental behavior change on a global scale. Whereas scientific information alone may trigger fear, and, in turn, disengagement, visual art and documentaries may speak to audiences on a more emotional level than intellectual reflection (Friedman, 2013).

For many individuals, to start caring about environmental problems, additional information may be needed. As this transdisciplinary study suggests, visual art and documentaries may be used to create the personal experiences that lead to increased mindfulness and awareness. One way they hold the potential to do so is by engaging audience participants, who are less familiar with climate change, on a more emotional than cognitive level. Another way is by showcasing the reflections of those experienced in engaging with and discussing visual arts, documentaries, and environmental issues.

With permission from the artists and participants, the research team audio recorded two focus groups in which participants shared their perceptions of the characteristics of *Earth*, a visual art exhibition by Chris Drury<sup>2</sup> (2016), and an abridged 15-minute version of *The Soil Solution to Climate Change*, a documentary film directed by Jill Cloutier and Carol Hirashima<sup>3</sup> (2011). The participants predominantly self-identified as female<sup>4</sup> individuals aged 30 to 50 years and were recruited through the art gallery’s website and mailing list. The lead researcher conducted the focus groups one to two days after the gallery visit and documentary film viewing which the participants accessed in random order. The audio recordings were then used to conduct a thematic analysis of participant perceptions.

A literature review on the potential advantages of visual communication, as a catalyst to emotional responses and a conveyor of climate change information, informed the selection of artworks used in the project. These visual forms of climate communication were selected as objects of study because they met the following criteria. First, the works presented an interesting narrative around the theme of earth, soil, and climate change that demonstrated personal relevance for participant audience members. Second, they appealed to viewers on both emotional and cognitive levels.

Art provides personal experience through the senses. Visual forms of climate communication provide an immersion experience of the subject matter. The global climate crisis is framed in terms of personal, community, and planetary health and well-being. Together the documentary and artworks allow participant audiences who engage to visualize the localized impact of climate change. The documentary and artworks are catalysts to emotional responses. Such visual narratives of a world full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA, Bennis & Nanus, 1987) allow imagery to be personalized. In this case, they encourage empathic connections to soil, place, and planet. Climate communication also poses the potential to trigger depression especially when it is not linked to solutions-driven, pro-environmental action.

This innovative ABR project investigated how artworks and a documentary fill this gap by communicating on individual as well as societal levels. The main challenge of visual communication regarding climate change is to increase the salience of the global climate crisis without direct experience of it, which may trigger further disengagement or climate despair<sup>5</sup>. This novel study identified the characteristics of artworks and a documentary that were seen to be important in changing attitudes and pro-environmental behaviors in the face of climate change. In an art gallery setting, the study explored participant audience members' perceptions of arts-based climate communication. In their 2020 case study, Roosen and Klockner determined visual arts-based climate communication is found to be more impactful and engaging when it contains a story, is personally relevant, and elicits an emotional response. The authors found that sparking interest in pro-environmental behavior change is aided by presenting a solution that is novel, simple to implement, and impactful.

### **Participant-voiced Poetic Inquiry**

In this review of Roosen and Klockner's (2020) case study, I include a participant-voiced poetic inquiry (Jones, 2010; Pillay et al., 2017) into the study's secondary data. I took a meta approach and applied ABR to an ABR case study. I used art (i.e., poetry) as a form of analysis to summarize the results of the case study related to climate crisis and the need for pro-social/pro-environmental behavior change. Participant-voiced poetic inquiry is a form of ABR that preserves the voices of

participants and distills essences of lived experience and agency; no other language is added. I composed poetry based exclusively on the focus group transcripts included in Roosen and Klockner's (2020) published case study. The experience of visual art triggering emotional responses is captured in the poetry included here. This participant-voiced poetic inquiry considers the central question of Roosen and Klockner (2020): Can visual art affect viewer perceptions of climate change? It explores the lived experience of visual art and documentary triggering climate concern, eliciting engagement, and sparking desire to change behavior in pro-environmental ways.

I constructed the following found poetry from the direct speech of focus group participants transcribed and included in the article reviewed here. Of the four poems, the first and last address the research question more directly, while the second poem is a found soil-sound art installation, and the third poem describes the process of a visual artwork triggering an emotional response. Arts-based approaches:

address...complex and often subtle interactions and...provide an image of those interactions in a way that makes them noticeable. In a sense arts-based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of the world. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 3)

ABR is perhaps one of few heuristics that is both expansive and nuanced enough to help synthesize and integrate lived experience of the growing climate crisis.

Following the participant-voiced poetic inquiry into the interdisciplinary, ABR project, this review concludes with some further considerations and commentary on "Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication: Experiencing the Reality of Climate Change and Leading the Way to Change."

### **"Potential to Increase Perceived Effectiveness"<sup>6</sup>**

The damage we are doing is recoverable in some way  
 Going around the exhibition actually made me feel quite sad  
 Somehow connected to a vision of the future  
 Where this is a sand museum  
 Jars of soil  
 Rare precious commodities  
 Things we've lost or destroyed

Video put a hopeful end on it  
 There is a scientific way of improving our life

Improving the future of the planet  
It is very motivating

Everyone sit down  
Watch it  
At least you're given a chance to know  
Looking for some meaning

It was kind of unexpected  
When people say climate change and pollution  
We think smoke tower  
This guy was making the argument with this farmer

You could relate to him  
He just kept pushing through barriers  
His story sort of making sense  
Being powerful  
That was shocking

Conclusions reached ten years ago  
Just going to tell you them again

Turning to a very scientific educational piece  
It didn't feel like someone was  
shoving anything down your throat  
Like you have to do this  
You have to do that

What are we doing on a global scale?  
On a more personal scale?  
Show me ideas I could implement in my day-to-day life

I couldn't take anything away  
I don't have chickens  
It didn't really show what I could do

Generally people learn better through doing things  
Present the solution to the problem  
In the form of a challenge

Why are you asking these questions?

How did you get to the conclusions?

I need to touch things  
To have things you could touch  
Things you can contribute to

Might encourage people to more fully come into the exhibition  
and what it's trying to say

Why does it matter to me?  
Someone completely detached from the soil

Really good artwork makes you concentrate  
Really powerful  
You just sort of sink into that  
What is around you disappears to a certain extent

What if you took a kid in?  
How would they feel about it?

You are forced to consider  
What you are doing is harmful  
Even if you don't like it  
At least you thought about it

So much made from really natural materials helped  
Made me resonate more  
Just feel more natural connection to something earth or wood

We are all very close to dirt  
We grow up in it  
Clean it  
Eat it  
Walk on it  
Grow things in it

The dirt in the bottles appeals to me  
Big mound of dirt would be better  
Come out covered in mud  
People will be like: where have you been?



A little bit more understanding  
If you could feel more emotional  
More connected  
You think  
We are all part of this  
We are all connected to it  
Doing things

### **Found Soil Sound Installation**

Would be interesting to find sounds you can't hear  
That are so quiet that microscopes  
You could have ear sets  
Depending on whereabouts you were standing  
Stand near  
Then find out that the bugs in that particular soil  
made a certain sound  
A frequency magnified  
You could listen

### **Magic Mushrooms**

Got a big emotional response  
With this mushroom cloud  
Had already sort of seen this one  
Just like it as an object  
The fact it's magic mushrooms is quite exciting  
When I read the pieces that made this one  
Were taken from a nuclear test site  
Suddenly had that mushroom cloud moment

### **“Triggering Concern and Engagement”<sup>7</sup>**

Good to end on a really hopeful note  
Unexpected  
Good presenter  
A nice story  
It's entertaining

Just come to that completely dry

I really hate those kinds of educational things that clobber you  
and I don't like art that's the same kind of thing

Aggressive and forceful

So many of them

Obviously, they're effective

People are afraid of climate change

or they believe in it

It's the most effective way of getting the message out

Seems dated

Cause I certainly have memories

As a child making mud pies

It would be really nice if you could make a mud pie

Just reconnect you to that sense of being a child again

Competition

Prizes

Terrific fun for everyone

Interactive

Definitely

Quite a build to it

Clear structure

Followed this one guy

Quite interesting to watch

He was very confident

Had clear questions

A child can respond really well to something about climate change

And I just don't think it would really take anything from this

That's a lost opportunity

Absolutely love collected earth

Beautiful idea

Showing what the artist did...traveled...connected to the places

Ignorance is the worst

Where you just don't think about anything

Even more convincing  
 Other people have no prior knowledge  
 Explain those conclusions

Good art is something that makes you feel emotional  
 Not necessarily happy  
 But just anything  
 Not neutral

Oh, I actually like it too  
 Knowing this, makes much more sense  
 Appeals to me so much more  
 Just didn't understand what it was at first  
 Given so much more information now  
 Getting all the different opinions  
 All the different pieces  
 That had a massive impact

This is super important  
 This is what you have to do  
 Not aggressive in any way  
 Gave me more of a background of something  
 I never realized

It's the same with art  
 It's a subtlety  
 a subtlety to this exhibition  
 and a gentleness

## Further Considerations

This review and participant-voiced poetic inquiry of “Art and Documentaries in Climate Communication: Experiencing the Reality of Climate Change and Leading the Way to Change” presents essences of the collective exploration captured by the study. It invites readers to engage in different types of reading and thinking. It reflects aspects of the small group discussions of visual artworks and a documentary film as catalysts for personal, societal, and global transformation at a time when so many of us around the world are calling for exactly this type of pro-environmental/pro-social, deep-structural, life-sustaining change. The study illustrated how documentaries familiarize audiences with multiple perspectives and are a useful method of teaching and learning

about controversial issues (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009). These visual forms of climate communication are considered in terms of their perceived effectiveness at triggering climate concern, eliciting engagement, and sparking desire to change behavior in pro-environmental ways by participant audience members.

The novel transdisciplinary ABR study was conducted in the second most expensive city in the UK in 2017. More female respondents chose to participate in this study. Female<sup>8</sup> (85%) and male (15%) voices are represented in the focus groups, reflected in the transcripts, and distilled in the found poetry included here. The participant audience members expressed their relative privilege<sup>9</sup> and their culture of care for the earth and future generations. They addressed the role of sensory perception in experiencing visual art and suggested ways to create even more engagement through interaction. They evaluated both forms of visual climate communication in terms of how interesting, unusual, relatable, and open to interpretation they are. Participants suggested to first trigger an emotional response to a subject through artworks, then provide both scientific background and the need to change via documentary film, and finally present a solution everyone can implement. They engaged in individual and group contemplation directly triggered by the documentary and artworks on soil and climate change. They pondered how children would interact and respond to the visual forms of climate communication they had experienced, and as the target audience of other documentaries and artworks.

Consequently, the case study also reflected the ecological gender gap, documented for decades, with regard to perceived vulnerability to risk (Bord & O'Connor, 1997) and care-taking duty (Clayton et al., 2015). Perhaps some participants were, in-part, motivated by an internalized ecofeminist bias: saving the planet is women's work (Alaimo, 1994). Perhaps socio-economic status, which is not a participant demographic included in the scope of the study, is a bigger determinant of participation. The gendered response to environmentally friendly consumption and use of household goods has been well-documented. It is possible that there is a gendered response to art gallery invitations to exhibits and documentaries on earth-centered themes or art exhibitions in general. It would be interesting to know if participant audience members were encouraged to bring their children along or if childcare was provided to make the art experience more practical and inclusive of all ages. Addressing potential barriers to participation (e.g., opening hours, admission fees, proximity to public transportation) and possible engagement supports (e.g., free or reduced admission, reception with refreshments, childcare, and parking) are as important as community outreach and networking when applying this methodology to future ABR.

As acknowledged in this ABR study, the two forms of visual climate communication selected as study objects were rather loosely related. The fact that the

documentary was created six years prior to the art exhibit seemed to present an issue for some participant audience members. Visual artworks and documentaries that are more closely related could be selected, commissioned, or even created by collaborative teams of artists, documentary filmmakers, and participants for future study. Further standalone qualitative studies, as well as those paired with quantitative follow-up studies that measure changes in attitudes and behaviors over time are needed to learn more about the perceived effectiveness of visual art to affect viewer perceptions of climate change and pro-environmental behavior changes from different perspectives. Learning, teaching, and co-/authoring more about combining art and documentary to promote planetary-/life-sustaining change through ABR has the potential to trigger real change precisely because it is a form of public scholarship that can be applied to many brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible issues related to the ethical need for collective, pro-social relating, values-based being and doing.

In addition to investigating a range of perspectives, from climate activists to climate deniers, as the study participants recommended, age should also be a variable in future studies. The participant age range<sup>10</sup> of this ABR case study need not be viewed as a limitation, but rather, as an invitation for future investigation involving different demographics, world locations, and types of research. Now compounded by the COVID-19 experience, the global youth mental health crisis in general, and in higher education specifically, is driving a pressing need to understand more about the role of ecological grief in the health and wellbeing of people. Moving forward, including trigger warnings and providing access to mental health resources and support services within the context of visual communication on climate crisis, and other controversial societal and technological issues, directed at youth and other vulnerable audiences is likely to become a bigger necessity.

When the future we face today is one that threatens our collective existence, leading the way to change could not be more important (Gidley, 2017). COVID-19, the associated remote working-learning context, the increase in socioeconomic disparities, and rates of substance and domestic abuse have only added complexity and trauma to the omni-crisis we face moving forward. The need to co-create collective experiential learning opportunities—through ABR and other forms of futures-informed PAR—that support learning and growth in our collective ability to mindfully be with all the discomfort and tensions within a pluriverse (Escobar, 2018, via Zapatistas of Chiapas) is significant. Shifting from toxic individuality within short-termism to collective futures/foresights thinking is just the beginning of building a world with room for many worlds in it. By focusing on complex human development needs, and building the capacity of all the individuals, communities, and stakeholders engaged, then new, collective, place-based forms of education will be able to cultivate human-centered transformation, safety, and well-being. Arts-based climate communication supports our ongoing struggle

to grow sustainable futures on the individual, institutional, and societal level by inspiring different ways of relating, knowing, and living deeply attuned to Earth justice.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. [www.climart.info](http://www.climart.info)
2. <https://chrisdrury.co.uk/>
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxiXJnZraxk>
4. That is, 3 of 20 participants self-identified as male.
5. Also referred to as climate change depression (Majeed & Lee, 2017) and ecological grief (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).
6. The title comes from the study's abstract.
7. The title comes from the study's abstract.
8. Self-identified gender.
9. That is, not caring about the global climate crisis is a racialized and classed privilege afforded those not yet aware or directly experiencing climate change.
10. 30 to 50-year-olds.