



Participatory arts and affective engagement with climate change: The missing link in achieving climate compatible behaviour change?



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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing number of arts based climate change interventions and the importance emphasised in the social psychology literature of achieving affective (emotional) engagement with climate change before climate compatible behaviour change is likely, to date there has been no systematic application of interpretive social science techniques to understand the ways in which these arts based interventions do or do not achieve affective public engagement with climate change and hence might hold the key to unlocking broader climate compatible behaviour change. This article makes two key contributions. First, it analyses the literature across social psychology and participatory arts to demonstrate why participatory, climate change based arts interventions could hold the key to more effective approaches to engaging multiple publics in climate compatible behaviour change. Second, using a small sample of participants in an arts based climate change intervention in the Inner Hebrides, Scotland, it demonstrates the potential value of combining social science techniques (in this case Q Methodology) with participatory arts interventions to better understand and learn from the ways in which climate based arts interventions achieve affective public engagement with climate change. This raises the potential for a significant new research and policy agenda looking forward.

1. Introduction

Individual behaviour change forms a core part of global responses to climate change mitigation and adaptation. A body of scholarship has emerged from the social sciences which seeks to understand how climate compatible behavioural change might be deliberately encouraged through different communication approaches. To date, however, the role of the arts in this area remains under researched, despite high profile calls for more attention to their potentially critical role in understanding and responding to climate change (e.g. Hulme, 2011) and a large emerging body of work in the arts and humanities that explicitly engages with climate change. What is missing is the use of social science techniques to understand the nature and extent of any influence of arts based climate change initiatives upon people's engagement with climate change (a necessary step if climate communication efforts are to effectively utilise arts based approaches as part of broader efforts to engage the public with climate change). This paper represents a first step towards addressing this gap.

Insights from social psychology based research on climate communication emphasise that behaviour change will not occur without both

cognitive engagement (people need to understand the issue) and affective (or emotional) engagement (people need to care about the issue) (Lorenzoni et al., 2007); and that, in fact, the latter is likely to be more influential than the former in shaping perceptions and motivating action (Loewenstein et al., 2001; O'Neill et al., 2013; Pallett and Chilvers, 2013). Yet, to date, most policy efforts around climate communication have focussed on achieving cognitive engagement (i.e. informing about causes, impacts or solutions), often focussing on rational arguments, such as financial benefits of energy saving (Whitmarsh et al., 2011b). In the UK, for example, despite government spending on information campaigns, low-carbon behaviour change remains limited, with most people seeing climate change as something that will not affect them personally in their lifetime (Leiserowitz, 2006) despite high levels of public awareness of the issue of climate change. It has been hypothesised that a key reason for the failure of these behaviour change campaigns is their neglect of affective (emotional) engagement, contributing to the oft cited "attitude-behaviour" gap (Hulme, 2011; Ockwell et al., 2009). It is argued that some of the obstacles to personal engagement with climate change are in part due to the fact that the very idea of 'climate' is a statistical phenomenon; measured on timescales

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frequently longer than human lives (e.g. Hulme, 2009). This type of abstract information relies on analytical processing of second hand information, rather than emotional understandings based on lived experience (Epstein, 1994; Weber, 2006). This, in turn, creates a perception that climate change affects temporally and geographically distant people, and is therefore perceived as irrelevant to people's day-to-day lives (Hulme, 2009).

This paper focuses on an area that holds significant promise (across multiple cultural contexts) for addressing this “affective gap” in existing public engagement efforts – namely the use of participatory arts-based interventions, as opposed to reliance on supposedly “objective” communication of scientific facts. As Hulme (2011) asserts, the arts have a key role to play in societal efforts to respond to climate change through shedding ‘... new light on the multiple meanings of climate change, and [creating] new entry points for policy innovation’ (Hulme, 2011: 178). It is possible to come away feeling emotionally affected by a scientific talk (particularly if you are a scientist). It is more likely, though, that one would walk away from a film, a play or an art exhibition having experienced some sense of emotional effect (Capstick et al., 2015; Lorenzoni and Whitmarsh, 2014; Weber, 2016). After all, it is the remit of the arts to explore issues of social relevance in ways that effect emotional responses; to provide new media through which preconceived ideas are exposed and challenged; and to tell stories in ways that both express and play a part in the ways humans construct and experience their life-world(s).

It is not surprising, then, that there are many artworks and art projects which have engaged directly with the idea of climate change; for example the work of *Cape Farewell*, *Tipping Point*, the *Artists and Climate Change* web site and the *Imagine 2020 Art and Climate Change* network. What is surprising is the gap in the literature relating to any attempts to utilise social science techniques in order to understand to what extent, and how affective or behavioural engagement results from such arts based interventions. Social scientists have engaged with visual and film based representations of climate change (see for example Leiserowitz, 2006; Lowe et al., 2006; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009; O'Neill and Smith, 2014; Sheppard, 2005). These studies have highlighted the work that images do, both at the point of production and the point of consumption (O'Neill and Smith, 2014), and the powerful effect imagery can have on the emotions (Leiserowitz, 2006; Nicholson-Cole, 2005; Sheppard, 2012). But these have predominantly focussed on media disseminated imagery. Little social science research has been done to understand the impacts of either art production or art consumption on audience engagement with climate change.

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in humanities based approaches engaging with artworks and creative practice more broadly. These studies can take the form of a geographical critique of the artist and artistic technique (Engelmann, 2015; Foster and Lorimer, 2007; Hawkins, 2010; Jellis, 2015; Yusoff, 2007); or an exploration of image making and creative methods as geographical practice (Bryan, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2015a,b; Howell, 2011; Tolia - Kelly, 2008). Williams (2016) stresses the importance of engaging with ideas of materiality and agency in the creative process; and many other studies coming from the field of geohumanities and posthumanities have followed this route as a way to engage with more than human social worlds, in particular, to think through ideas raised by the idea of the anthropocene (Dixon et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2015a,b; Hawkins and Straughan, 2014; Ingram, 2013).

Today, there is a rich body of geographical literature engaging specifically with climate change and environmental concerns through art, literature, performance and creative practices (Bottoms, 2012; Cant and Morris, 2006; Daniels and Endfield, 2009; Endfield and Morris, 2012; Miles, 2010; Trexler and Johns-Putra, 2011; Yusoff, 2010; Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011); including an excellent study into the more than human social worlds of the Bird Yarns birds, the empirical focus of this paper, by Hawkins et al., 2015a,b. While there are many humanities based studies of artworks, and in particular climate change artworks,

however, these have predominantly engaged with the artworks and participants themselves (including material and nonhuman participants), rather than the audience. Therefore, there is a need for an understanding of how these artworks are interpreted and evaluated by a lay audience from a social science perspective. A social science based research focus on climate change art addresses a fundamental concern within contemporary social science with the role of lay knowledges in science, technology and public policy (e.g. Fischer, 2000; Jasanoff, 2004; Wynne, 1996).

Bird Yarns, the climate change focussed artistic intervention that forms the empirical focus of this paper, was a community knitting project, run by artist Deirdre Nelson and supported and funded by Cape Farewell on the Isle of Mull in summer 2012. As well as the audience who came to see the artwork, there was a group of local people who contributed to the physical making of the artwork by knitting arctic terns in a weekly knitting group (as well as an international online group who also knitted birds, but for the purposes of this study, we focus on the local knitting group). From a climate change perspective, this type of community based artwork, one that is produced and consumed by local people within a specific location, is worth investigating because it can offer key insights into non-“climate expert” disseminated visualisations of climate change (unlike media campaigns, which tend to be scientist or expert led, and often tied to a specific agenda). Therefore, in a project like this one, it is the lay understandings of climate and climate change which are brought to the fore, responding to calls for a more nuanced approach to creative and lay representations of, and engagement with, climate change (Brace and Geoghegan, 2010; Ereat and Segnit, 2006a; Whitmarsh et al., 2011b). Creative engagements with local environments, and the ways in which they are changing, are of relevance in terms of indigenous knowledges as well as developing country contexts, where scholars from different disciplines are developing arts-based interventions with communities to explore local construction of climate and change in their own lived worlds. This also links to emerging work on the role of museum exhibits (Rees, 2017).

The emotional effects of artworks on audiences are likely to be complex, long-term, yet nonlinear and difficult to attribute to a particular moment, making studying them from a social science perspective somewhat tricky. However, there are specific, immediate questions arising from these forms of climate change engagement that social science techniques applied to artworks are able to elucidate. There is a significant gap in the climate change literature around the impact of art practices on the wider audience who come to see and interact with them, and this raises important questions. Do arts-based interventions around climate change offer a way of achieving affective engagement with climate change (increasing the chances of subsequent behavioural changes)? Are they a means through which a more locally situated space for understanding, expressing and engaging with climate change is created, and if so is this significant in their impacts on people's levels of engagement with climate change (specifically; cognitive, affective or behavioural effects)? Do they overcome some of the stubborn barriers to encouraging climate compatible behavioural change that existing social science research on climate change communication has highlighted, such as the role of prior attitudes in mediating how people process new information (Corner et al., 2012)? All these are questions that could be answered were social science based techniques to be employed alongside arts-based engagements with climate change. And all are questions whose answers will shed new light on the nature of interventions (whether through policy interventions or grassroots initiatives) that are most likely to provide the basis through which locally meaningful public engagement with climate change can be facilitated.

In the face of the above gaps and the potential significance of scholarship that integrates social science techniques with arts-based interventions, this paper seeks to contribute in three key ways. First, it interrogates a range of existing literatures to highlight a number of key insights of relevance to future research that might seek to utilise social

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