



Report

# *Art and Activism I Environmental crisis: a dilemma for the artist?*

from the IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting

By Fanny Martin



**IETM Report: Art and Activism I**  
Environmental crisis: a dilemma for the artist?

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**Report from the IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting 2023**  
12 - 15.06.2023

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**Graphic layout:**  
Milton Pereira  
on a template by Formula  
[www.formulaprojects.net](http://www.formulaprojects.net)

**Published by**  
IETM — International Network  
for Contemporary Performing Arts  
Square Saintelette 19,  
1000 Brussels, BE  
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This publication should be mentioned as follows: F. Martin, "IETM Report: Art and Activism I, Environmental crisis: a dilemma for the artist?", IETM, Brussels, September 2023.

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## Summary

Traditional language may not be enough to convey the enormity of the challenges we face in a rapidly changing environment. While scientists may have data on the urgency of climate change, artists are most likely better positioned to predict our cultural climate.

Both nature and art can teach us to see the world in a new light - but how can we combine the artistic purpose of our work with reducing our environmental impact and creating awareness, when these are not always aligned?

During this session, two artists whose work is intimately linked to the human experience of water are sharing insights on their relationship with activism and how they relate to the urgent need for the reduction of the environmental impact of human culture.

### Moderator

[Marianne Krogh](#), Curator, writer and editor, Denmark

### Speakers

[Andri Snær Magnason](#), writer and director, Iceland

Laila Skovmand, Artistic Director Between Music, Denmark



Co-funded by  
the European Union

This publication is produced as part of our Creative Europe project The New International in the Performing Arts (NIPA): Bridging local and global.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# Art and Activism I

## Environmental crisis: a dilemma for the artist?

### Introduction

Fires, droughts, torrential rains and forced mobility: the myriad symptoms of climate change across the globe make it increasingly hard to grasp and relate to. Similarly to a black hole, we cannot ever see the totality of it, only its edges. As the sensationalist headlines roll on - lost in a constant stream of consumerist messages - we seem to become blunted by repetition and paralysed by the enormity of the looming disaster. Are we acting bored because we're feeling powerless? What is the role of art in a time of crisis, when change is badly needed? Do artists have a responsibility in the climate crisis due to their position, privilege or other?

This dialogue session offered an opportunity for two artists to unfold their thoughts and examine their practices across their body of work, taking the long view on the relationship between art and activism.

### Slow Art as Resistance

#### Between Music: Aquasonic

Danish performance artist, singer and composer Laila Skovmand is the Artistic Director of *Between Music*. Over ten years ago, she started a cycle of research and projects to bring together water and music, resulting in *Aquasonic*, an installation-concert where musicians immersed in water tanks play custom-made instruments. For Laila, the experience opens up - through the language of art itself - key questions of connection and isolation, self and surrounding, commonalities and differences. *Aquasonic* has been presented in varied contexts, from concert halls to fashion shows, and is always striving to avoid falling into 'boxes' - including the climate box - to let art do its work.

As the project develops and the environmental crisis continues to grow, new questions have come to the surface: **how can art act as a platform for dialogue - prompting audiences to find their own answers and angles, yet without leading them in a didactic way?**

#### Slower Art, Longer Meaning

*Aquasonic* conveys its meaning through its doing. In art, as in every dimension of our contemporary lives, we need fewer and longer-lasting things. Going against the grain of the capitalist way of artistic production obsessed with new works, exemplified by funding systems requiring new productions at regular intervals, *Aquasonic* has now been touring for eight years, which allows it to reduce waste, preserve energy and develop deeper meaning.

*Aquasonic* also serves as a metaphor for the power of personal change as a first, essential step: changing oneself, shifting perspectives and learning new techniques. The better we know ourselves, the more we can find what we all have in common and resist polarisation forces that pull us apart into 'us' and 'them'.

Rather than dictating what people should be thinking, *Aquasonic* is an invitation to feel right in our bodies and our place and role in the world.

#### Amplifying Urgent Messages

Previously, *Aquasonic* has been used for overt activist goals, for example through a campaign by German humanitarian organisation *United4Rescue*, which asked EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to intervene in the Mediterranean refugee crisis. In the *Drowned Requiem* video, *Between Music*'s musicians sink to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea while playing the EU's 'Ode to Joy' anthem. Using techniques and aesthetics developed over many years, this campaign raised awareness and funds towards a rescue ship.



IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting, Photo: Gorm Branderup

### The Work of Art: Framing and Naming

#### Shifting Perspectives

Following Laila's presentation, Icelandic author Andri Snær Magnason retraces the artistic steps that led to his latest work *On Time and Water*. From his first poetry collection to a play and a children's book, Andri chooses to 'betray' his audience by not following in his own footsteps and playing with artistic forms as a pathway to change.

*On Time and Water* challenges multiple expectations: Andri feels unqualified to talk about climate change as a non-medical professional attempting to deliver health advice. Instead of writing about climate change, he offers new narratives, tapping into the long tradition of story-led paradigm shifts. To counteract the feeling of boredom that now seems to accompany mentions of climate change, he focuses on 'time and water', a transversal view on the effect of climate change which observes how water elements - glaciers, ocean levels, permafrost, patterns of rain and snow - are coming out of balance all at once in the highly compressed time frame of a human lifespan. To tackle the enormity of glaciers - symbols of eternity, moving at the pace of millenia - melting under our eyes, he shifts perspectives and speaks of his own family, especially of his grandmother, a pioneering Icelandic glacier explorer.

#### Nested Metaphors & Symbolic Truths

*On Time and Water* is a 'letter to the future', a eulogy for something that was supposed to be eternal. When change happens, it takes a while for language to catch up and name the new reality; yet we need to be able to describe our imagined futures to create them. We need to connect to the past to understand the future, we need mythology to understand science and local and personal stories to understand a global issue.

We also need to take the value of poetry and symbols seriously. Every civilization has had holy rivers and sacred forests, which engineers have ruthlessly diverted and cut down. The loss of common imagination results in isolation and art is a means to put symbols in circulation to connect people, exchange thoughts and emotions and lead to concerted action.

## Art & Communication

Andri then considers his role as an artist attempting to communicate about science, taking as an example something as abstract as what ph levels will be like in 2100. If numbers fail to communicate the urgency and scale of the climate crisis, it is because they are culturally meaningless and too abstract. If this doesn't work, then mythology can be mobilised as an efficient means to effectively highlight these issues in order to create shared understanding. Stories about legendary events, elemental forces, religion, trade, power, thunder and love are more powerful tools than out-of-context bare facts to convey how the changes at stake are relevant to our present lives and a shared future.

## Radical Change: Love & Interdependence

### Seven Generation Thinking

Having established that art is a necessary form of engagement with the world, the artists in conversation move to examine the ethics of art production. How is it possible to continue to produce as much as we currently do?

For French philosopher [Bruno Latour](#), our relationship with nature has long been marked by our take on the planet as eternal and stable - an endless stream of resources that allowed humanity to focus on production and create extraordinary things. This attitude comes at the cost of a distance between humans and nature, a gap that we are now attempting to bridge because of our greater awareness of the finiteness of resources.

There is therefore a renewed role for artistic and cultural production as practices of interdependence and co-creation. Instead of stopping to produce, we need to produce differently, with a much greater emphasis on responsibility and long-term consequences. The panellists invoke the [Seventh Generation Principle](#), based on an ancient Haudenosaunee philosophy, which is an invitation to make decisions in our time that result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future - way beyond our own children and grandchildren.

## Love as Common Ground

As well as longer time frames, the other critical dimension too often missing from climate-related discussions, policies and actions is **love**. To quote Senegalese forest engineer Baba Dioum, in his speech at the General Assembly of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) in 1968:

*"In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught."*

— *Baba Dioum*

From love to understanding and from education to action, this is another role that art can play. We're all accomplices in the unfolding climate drama - maybe the only thing that artists can truly do is to channel their talent towards paradigm change through stories that bring emotions back to the centre of our lives.

### Arranged Marriage with the Planet

The talk concludes by mentioning Italian philosopher [Emanuele Coccia](#), who compares our failing to love the planet with the Grimm Brothers' *Frog Prince* fairy tale: we have not been educated or accustomed to thinking of love as something that can affect individuals belonging to different species or kingdoms; and as we see in fairy tales, we are ready to love a frog only if it turns into a prince. For Coccia, humanity is trying to get closer to the non-human nature because we have to, but we still behave as if it is an arranged marriage: we do not get close to each other because of love but because of necessity. He advocates instead for finding real interspecies love and for a new type of relationship between the human and non-human.



