

Climate Grief and Eco-Anxiety in Art: Themes, Forms, and Audience Effects

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has increasingly emerged not only as a scientific and political crisis but also as an affective and aesthetic phenomenon. This study examines how contemporary art engages with climate grief and eco-anxiety, focusing on the thematic, formal, and experiential dimensions of such works. Drawing on affect theory, art history, and interdisciplinary approaches to environmental humanities, the paper explores how artists represent emotional responses to ecological loss, including grief, fear, resilience, and hope. The analysis highlights the role of diverse media installation, video, performance, and participatory art in materializing climate-related affects and translating abstract environmental processes into sensory and embodied experiences. It further investigates audience reception, emphasizing how artworks foster empathy, narrative engagement, and, in some cases, pro-environmental action. While climate art can deepen awareness and ethical reflection, its capacity to motivate sustained behavioural change remains uneven and shaped by broader social and political constraints. By situating climate grief within evolving artistic practices and audience dynamics, this study argues that art serves as a critical interface between individual emotion and collective ecological consciousness. It underscores the importance of integrating artistic, educational, and policy-oriented frameworks to address the psychological and cultural dimensions of the climate crisis.

Keywords: Climate Grief, Eco-Anxiety, Environmental Art Affective Aesthetics, and Audience Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Identifying environmental crises as an aesthetic phenomenon and determining how they are expressed through the concept of climate grief can provide valuable insights into emotional and material relationships between art and climate crisis [1]. Climate grief may be described as a preoccupation with materiality and the emotional effects of material change [2]. The specificity of climate grief as an emotional interface with works arises from a plurality of temporalities (long duration, delay, slow violence) and affects (sorrow, terror) being negotiated within many of the works through their engagement with the materiality of certain mediums and forms. Art addressing environmental devastation has historically appealed to such temporalities and affected atmospheres. Articulations and engagements with climate anxiety, indignation, and grief, however, possess a unique character of their own when examined in relation to contemporary climate-related phenomena [3]. Climate grief invests in the materials and media of the work to reinforce attachment to visible and audible deteriorations of ecological systems motivated by climate change. The material engagements frequently stimulate specific corporeal and sensorial responses while simultaneously provoking attention to large-scale climatic transformations outside the frame [4].

Conceptual Foundations: Climate Grief, Eco-Anxiety, and Aesthetic Engagement

Grief and fear represent legitimate responses to the threat of climate change and the erosion of natural environments [2]. Climate adversity exposes the limits of contemporary existential security, rendering mourning appropriate (and the loss itself real) even for those who have not experienced catastrophe or disruption firsthand. Anticipatory anxiety, which fosters ethical responsibility and collective memory, differs from grief per se [2]. Aesthetic engagement acts as ethical witness to the multiple crises of climate change, inviting recognition of

climate risk as it materializes through the experience and struggles of others. Climate grief finds expression via affective exposure to bodily, sensory, or environmental transformations [3]. The past tends to rupture with the advent of environmental precarity, yet the future does not simply vanish. Works that evoke grief towards non-catastrophic loss articulate a critical temporalization in which survival becomes an open question for humanity. Fear acts as an ethical lens through which to confront systemic risk and climate trauma in the Anthropocene [4]. Exposure to climate adversity from a safe distance or through vicarious experience fosters hesitation and clarifies a broader existential context: what constitutes a life worth living, when encroaching environmental change makes existence itself a matter of debate? Surviving shifts from a biological to an ethical concern [3]. Affect theories frame works that elicit climate grief, eco-anxiety, and attendant sensorium as art. Collective memory mediates, shapes, and intensifies these affects; climate risk thereby emerges as ethical demand. Performative hope suggests a stance towards the urgency or intractability of climate threats. Art shifts the question from 'Can we survive?' to 'What future(s) is (are) survival worth for humanity?' [4]

Historical Precedents: Art Responding to Environmental Threats

Between 1960 and 1980, ecological disasters polluted the environment while the fashion for abstract painting melted away. Several painters addressed these subjects, focusing on the interdependence of ecology and culture [2]. The start of the twenty-first century saw the conceptual, very widely defined acquisition of prominence. Presented through new visual devices, writings, exhibitions and seminars, this movement again noted that, although scientific reports on the demise of the planet by failing to address the cultural dimension continued to proliferate, the planet would perish without socio-cultural corrections [3]. Graffiti has existed for millennia, but the fashion for wall art is much later. Beginning in the 1960s, it conveyed socio-political concerns on inner-city walls in New York. The late twentieth century was the transition into a new era of planetary awareness, the Anthropocene Griffiths surveyed. In 1971 and 1973, Wallace Stevens's *Mr. Antipope* was published, traditionally considered a high-point of post-war British poetry. He witnessed daily destruction. Ideally, poets should still exist who can come close to his vision, nowadays truly global [4]. However, the official cultural response began considerably earlier. Lewis Mumford ignored capital cities, nation-states or monolithic western culture and addressed patterns on a planetary level throughout his works. Collective actions of the citizenry resulted from either disaster or corrective experience [3]. The end of the 1970s marked the long-form resurfacing of a very ancient and widespread planetary awareness, under six majeur headings: catastrophe, caprice, survivalism; equipment, growth, and the post-story-world. Human-microbe inter-relationship historicization provided broadening vision. McLuhan had diverted full attention from so-called "content" to media [3].

Thematic Landscape: Grief, Fear, Resilience, and Hope in Contemporary Works

Climate change catalyzes responses of grief, mourning, sorrow, and loss. Recognition appears in a spectrum of contemporary artworks that articulate explicit concerns related to these feelings, stressing the precarious state of certain places, the intertwining of personal and collective loss, the responsibility to future generations, and the ethical dilemmas of testimony [3]. Such artworks also testify to survivors of hazardous environments, stating their vulnerability, and catalog the erosion of physical and epistemic boundaries due to extreme events [3]. They invoke acknowledgment of climate threats, empathy toward affected communities, and recognition of collective complicity in anthropogenic change. A circuit linking grief, anxiety, resilience, and care emerges, highlighting the importance of shifting from fear to action and cultivating a critical, self-reflexive audience stance [4]. Grief, loss, mourning, and sorrow appear as preminent themes in selected works. Recurrences include landscape mourning, erosion of boundaries, intergenerational responsibility, and survivor testimony [3]. Further works explore ecological anxieties about species extinction; strategies of resilience, adaptation, and agency; and the co-creation of hopeful imaginaries. The fundamental question confronting contemporary society concerns potential coping strategies and adaptive behaviours in light of severe climate threats and uncertainties [4]. Artworks engage with personal and collective routes toward possible futures, elements of artistic and poetic enaction, redirection from fear to action, and attention to collective vulnerability, care, and responsibility broaden and deepen paths toward climate futures [2].

Formal Strategies: Media, Techniques, and Narrative Jurisdiction

Climate grief and eco-anxiety are characterized by specific formal strategies. Although affliction remains at the heart of the works of art analyzed, countless art forms installation, video, performance, digital, and participatory have been explored and refined in the production of climate-induced grief [4]. Among the stylistic registers identified, minimalism endures as a choice when the preferred rhetorical avenue is one of muted catastrophe. Many artists continue to respond to the traditized, documentary exigency of an archival voice and its media-based affordances, importing texts, documents, and human sounds into audiovisual compositions to engender modes of witnessing; though now, alongside the installation of the archive, the sonic modality increasingly is also deployed as a means to simulate atmospheres, inner states, and climate affect [3]. Paralleling the archival voice, but at the fringes of the commodity form, an array of post-interpretive strategies is utilized to unsettle assumptions about climate and to jolt contemporaneity into a relation with an intense past; for these works, the genealogical depth of

climate is engaged through diacritical disruptions to the commodity form itself: a détournement of very large, blind, and conspicuous monologues (on the civilizations of the Maya and the Baka people) orchestrated as exquisitely illustrated folk tales; a retrospective accumulation of still images, scorched lands, and nocturnal oil fields as modalities of reckoning fine art's situational obsolescence within climate discourse; a lavipeditum (a didactic travelling exhibition of printed sheets) that initiates what could be called a Speculative Museum wherein the scented surface of the exhibition paper serves to formulate facets of a still-extant natural course that is now propelled toward extinction; a rehearsal of the dream sequence of another epoch (of the myth of the Tower of Babel) recast as climatological fable; and the dissemination of books, one wherein the entire volume is typographically stripped down to the single-archetype "e" in order to investigate an arch-clause concerning Humanomics and another devoted to the geo-anthropologist François L'Hotte are all examples pursuing an engagement with the intensity of the past, the inheritance of the non-human, and the wrenching of the climatic into the artistic different[4]. Despite these intense articulations of climate-related content, climate-afflicted works also appear in a speculative, 'chambers-of-the-foetus-in-the-womb neglected-for-ages' and negative-'still-closer-to-immediacy-for-farther-listening' phase [3]. Climate art continues to undertake ensemble, class-collective explorations within inner metropolitan limits, as well as tentative rehearsals of climate-legged outreach toward neighbouring entities [4]. The ostensible varieties of the 'climate-gap' and of the 'gap-in-the-climate' are now being animated, towards artistic configurations yet to be defined and an encouragement of what one could call 'petrification-hushed fruition' that nevertheless secures room for time-valences in 'climatic-affectioned' variants of the 'design-hybrid' yet to come[3].

Audience Reception: Empathy, Activation, and Ethical Considerations

Artworks addressing climate grief and eco-anxiety often elicit empathic engagement among audiences. This response can be conceptualized as narrative transportation, a "cognitive, emotional, and imaginative involvement in a story" that inspires beliefs and intentions proportional to the narrative framework [3]. Narrative frames can vary widely and operate transversally across different stories, yet some narratives resonate more strongly in specific contexts [4]. Pandemic art has prompted reflections on isolation and vulnerability; artworks challenging epistemic injustice in the age of disinformation amplify responses to injustice; responses to the ongoing climate crisis regularly catalyze concern for the ecology, yet resonate differently amid oppressive heat or disasters because the temporality of crisis colours forms of engagement [3]. Art addressing climate change frequently establishes a sense of exposure to climate risk, vulnerability, and distress elements that appeal to human trauma or distress. These themes and their entanglement with wider historical movements subsequently shape visioning, melancholia, collective memory, and performative hope [4]. Civic, behavioural, and pro-environmental actions constitute common motivations for audiences seeking to alleviate emotional burdens and soothe eco-anxiety. Civic actions tend to rank highest in importance, being conceived as the greatest opportunity to mobilize, while personal behaviour change elicits ambivalence; changes deemed achievable, reasonable, and the greatest opportunity for impact inspire engagement, while those regarded as excessively burdensome or unrealistic inhibit sustained behavioural efforts[3]. Positive climate art centred on agency or resilience may spur citizenship, yet widespread societal political barriers suppress widespread activation; participatory pieces provide opportunities for transformative agency, yet often trigger pre-existing barriers [4].

Interdisciplinary Intersections: Science Communication, Education, and Community Practice

Art has long addressed environmental challenges, now including climate change, degradation, and extreme weather. Trajectories span substantial movements and epiphanies [3]. Cultivation of a historical lens reveals key periods, early avant-garde, postwar, and new media whereby artists reacted to rising issues, setting precedents for the current urgency. Climate grief and eco-anxiety prevail in contemporary works [4]. Dimension, materiality, and institutional context modulate the associated experience. Works evoke a wide spectrum of sensations but overlap in soliciting recognition of submerged, systemic risk and awareness of futural uncertainty. Formal choices mirror erstwhile engagements yet signify the distinct immediacy of oscillating planetary systems and lifeworlds[3]. Scholarship now emphasizes art's convergence with climate science, education, policy, and community practice; these intersections further adapt longstanding forms and conceptual orientations. Scientific collaboration includes visualizations, diagrams, scenario-building, and public symposia, while educators co-design climate-related courses for post-secondary institutions [4]. Community initiatives support co-creation with diverse collectives and translation across the art-science-education nexus [3]. The emergent pedagogical focus anticipates an alternative approach aligned with community co-creation and a broadened understanding of audience participation, art as entry point for reflection, actuation, and co-design rather than knowledge transfer. Initiatives seek participatory-practice models for diverse public roles, ranging from gallery audiences to intergenerational knowledge exchange and the multi-species polyphony of ecoacoustics [4].

Methodological Approaches: Analyzing Artworks and Audience Experience

Responses to contemporary climate threats elicit grief and anxiety, yet these topics figure prominently in works by climate artists [3]. The following describes methodological approaches to examine these phenomena. I analyze

works through an art-historical lens and engage their audience reception through empirical research [3]. Frameworks for analyzing artworks highlight the media, techniques, and concepts through which climate grief and eco-anxiety are articulated [4]. Mixed-methods strategies complement this analysis by investigating audience experiences and effects. Such work proceeds through qualitative interviews, observational coding, and audience surveys, allowing me to track responses across diverse contexts and media. Data sources include artist statements, curatorial texts, and critical reviews, as well as exhibition catalogs documenting the commissioning and presentation of relevant works [4].

Case Studies: Selected Works Across Media

The following concise accounts illustrate climate grief and eco-anxiety in murals, installations, videos, and digital platforms. The works were chosen for their artistic merit and consistent recognition on websites featuring art addressing climate change. Analysis focuses on thematic content, formal strategies, and audience responses, rather than proposals for deeper engagement [3]. Drawing widespread notice in 2020, a mural by Tatyana Fazlalizadeh in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood presents a woman looking straight at the viewer with an expression of defiance, tears streaming down her cheeks, next to the urgent words "Climate Grief Is Real." Accompanying pieces with phrases such as "The Future Is Too Much for Me to Bear" and "I'm Afraid of the Future" name specific fears, often of extreme heat; in a second iteration, the mural now reads, "Climate Grief Lives in My Body." Fazlalizadeh articulates both ideological and personal feelings about climate change, connecting them to broader injustices and inviting others to share their own grief for collective healing [4]. Chantal Akerman's posthumous film "Une famille" expresses anxiety about rising sea levels from the perspective of a house, conveyed through narrated letters addressed to its former residents, the family name now forgotten. Each name evokes different climate scenarios borne from a wider emotional landscape [3]. The poetic tone fosters identification with the house; numerous water motifs accentuate the extreme presence of water in the environment and the silence around it. Viewers report strong feelings of sadness at abandonment time, unease about remaining after global evacuation, ethical concern for future generations, and dread as climate chronicles accelerate [4]. The website "Only If You Love" invites individuals to offer support for the climate crisis via a collectively authored pledge, yet signatories tend to abandon the project before contributing. Holdings materialize as a crowd-shared video montage featuring poignant one-second clips collected from over 2,400 entries to the international video relay project "24h for the Planet." Urban narratives significantly prevail while recurring themes investigate trans-homeland ties, complex relationships with the Earth, mobilization of collective action, and calls to intergenerational solidarity. Artists consider pervasive neglect of climate change, awareness that often falters in its transmission, buried emotions surrounding this threat, the cleaving of voice from body in video performance, and cultural resistance framing sustained artistic engagement as an honest act of love against climate despair [5].

Implications for Practice: Curatorial, Educational, and Policy Dimensions

Deliberate combinations of information and emotion are essential qualities of effective artworks that elicit climate grief and eco-anxiety [6]. Aesthetic engagement, by virtue of its formal attributes, demands a kind of attention that enables imaginative projection into socioecological futures and, more dramatically, the apprehension of vulnerability that environmental change renders foreboding [7]. Climate disruption looms as a menacing presence through the articulation of fear and the evocation of trauma and catastrophe. The status of the climate crisis as a collective event, a chain of disasters extending into the past, present, and future has not only spurred artists to reflect ensemble experiences of loss; it has also invited reflections on the means by which human futures will fuse with the futures of other species and systems [8]. These thematic and formal qualities have been aptly integrated into surveys that track a historical convergence of contemporary art and ecological awareness across national and continental boundaries. Historically striking parallels and systematic differences can also be discerned, especially in the treatment of anticipated disaster, the articulation of ethical responsibilities, and the imaginative exploration of future alternatives [9]. Policy-makers, educators, and curators concerned with climate-change activism have addressed the efficacy of aesthetic engagement within art and its associated empirical impact on reception. The formation of climate-resilient futures under the specter of mutuality constitutes a second, significant line of inquiry that expands the analytical scope of thematic, material, and aesthetic concern beyond artworks directly addressing climate grief and eco-anxiety [3]. Thematic analyses frequently overlook these motivations, yet they underpin many contemporary artistic practices and suggest broader ecological crisis states of urgency. Despite the centrality of collective futures in climate discourse and project formulations, attainable futures remain insufficiently theorized as a core concern of artistic engagement with climate change [10].

CONCLUSIONS

Climate grief and eco-anxiety have become defining emotional responses to the contemporary ecological crisis, and art has emerged as a powerful medium through which these affects are expressed, mediated, and understood. This study demonstrates that contemporary artworks do more than represent environmental degradation; they actively shape how individuals and communities experience, interpret, and respond to climate change. Through diverse themes of loss, fear, resilience, and hope, artists articulate the emotional complexity of living in an era of

environmental uncertainty. Formal strategies ranging from immersive installations to participatory and digital practices translate large-scale climatic processes into intimate, sensory experiences that bridge the gap between abstraction and lived reality. These approaches position art as a site of ethical witnessing, where audiences confront both the immediacy and the temporality of ecological transformation. Audience responses reveal that climate art can foster empathy, reflection, and, at times, motivation for civic and environmental action. However, the translation of emotional engagement into sustained behavioural change is not guaranteed and is often mediated by structural, cultural, and political factors. This underscores the limits of aesthetic intervention when operating in isolation from broader systems of governance and social organization. Ultimately, climate art occupies a critical space at the intersection of emotion, knowledge, and action. Its value lies not only in raising awareness but in reconfiguring the terms through which climate futures are imagined and negotiated. Moving forward, greater collaboration between artists, scientists, educators, and policymakers will be essential to harness the transformative potential of art in addressing the climate crisis. By fostering collective reflection, participatory engagement, and alternative imaginaries, art can contribute meaningfully to the cultural and ethical reorientation required for sustainable and just ecological futures.

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