

Climate Action: Challenge Your Status Quo Bias!

Olafur Eliasson, 10 December 2018

If you take a stroll in central London starting this Tuesday, you may encounter thirty blocks of glacial ice, thousands of years old. Some are transparent, others opaque. Their colours are tones of blue and white. Traces of times long past, in the form of dirt and other natural materials, are encapsulated in the seemingly immobile forms. Put your hand on the ice and feel the cold, smooth surface against your skin. Put your ear to the ice and listen to the crackling noises it produces as it melts. Look – and witness the ecological changes that our world is undergoing.

The blocks have travelled from afar – after breaking off the Greenland ice sheet and floating out to sea, they were harvested from the cold waters along the coast of Nuuk, Greenland. They journeyed to Bankside, outside Tate Modern, and to the City of London, in front of Bloomberg's European headquarters, in containers normally used to transport frozen fish from the Arctic to dinner plates around the world. Despite their foreign appearance, they are open to contact and suggest that you listen carefully to what they have to say. These blocks of Arctic ice tell their own story – a story which is also ours. Their melting into the ocean is our world melting.

The ice forms *Ice Watch*, a public artwork that I conceived with geologist Minik Rosing. *Ice Watch* raises awareness of climate change and explores how feelings of distance and disconnection, of proximity and relevance, hold us back or make us engage. Before taking the project to London for its most extensive manifestation to date, we presented *Ice Watch* on two earlier occasions. In 2014 the work was placed in front of Copenhagen's city hall to coincide with the publication of the UN IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report on the climate. The ice gave physical shape to the numbers in the report. In 2015 the glacial ice materialised in Paris's Place du Pantheon in the context of COP21, which gave us the Paris Agreement. In the time that has passed since then, the issue of climate change has finally begun to take centre stage. This October, the IPCC published its most recent findings and issued a warning: we only have 12 years to limit the impact of climate change.

What should we do? Facts still have value for most people, and the facts at hand tell a frightening tale. Yet facts alone are not enough to truly engage and motivate people; at times they even create the opposite effect – distance, apathy. Motivating changes to our behaviour requires an expanded strategy. We need to communicate the fact of climate change to hearts as well as heads, to emotions as well as minds. And we have to act on it.

Scientists have studied the psychology involved in individual and collective decision-making. I've been inspired by the research of Elke Weber, Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, who has collaborated with my studio in the past. Weber has contributed to UN IPCC reports on climate change and has spent decades investigating the psychology of decision-making. She asks fundamental questions – When do we engage? When do we ignore or grow numb? – and has presented a number of striking findings that I keep coming back to:

There's a clear *status quo bias* in our responses to taking climate action. We are inclined to stick to what we have. The here-and-now is local, immediate, and known, whereas the long-term consequences of *not changing* are abstract, uncertain, easily ignored, and seemingly disconnected from our individual lives.

Single action bias is another psychological mechanism at play. It is easier to take one step to resolve an issue than to take several. That one step may have symbolic worth if you're a politician – it may satisfy voters, your base – but sustained action is hard, and it takes political courage since the value is harder to communicate and less newsworthy.

Perhaps most importantly when it comes to climate action: inducing fear does not seem to be an effective strategy. As Weber writes, while fear can shock people into taking an immediate action, you can't live in a perennial state of shock. Since climate action has to be carried out consistently over time, to become part of our lives, we need to focus on positive narratives and positive consequences of change that give inspiration.

And this is what *Ice Watch* is about. I am hopeful that we can create inner transformation and push for systemic change. To do so, we have to make use of all tools at hand. Art and culture are one such tool. Take status quo bias. The arts conjure up other futures, giving them a shape, making them vividly felt. Whether in a novel, an artwork, a play, or a film, they can make tangible and explicit what may otherwise be difficult to grasp. They can transport us over vast distances to be and feel with people and places that are far away. In these ways, the arts can influence our responses to issues like climate change and action.

We need to make use of all these means that connect with the future and with what is distant, that allow us to recognise that we are a part of this huge unruly network called the earth. Our mark, our footprint, on the earth is real. The consequences are real; people are already feeling them. Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland, gives these victims a voice in her recently published book, *Climate Justice*. She communicates the resilience shown by so many and the leadership they demonstrate in their lives and communities. We have to listen – to those already afflicted, to ourselves, to the world.

And there are things we can do:

At a systemic, national level, we can organise to put pressure on politicians and governments to, for instance, introduce ambitious taxes on carbon while securing a just transition away from our carbon economies. We can join others in calling on businesses to divest from fossil fuels and instead invest in sustainable energy and innovation. Fossil fuels have to stay in the ground.

At the NGO level, we can support organisations that work to educate girls and women. Women are key to curbing climate change.

In our lives, we can fly less and check our refrigerators, freezers, and air conditioners – if they use refrigerants called HFCs (hydrofluorocarbons), they're highly damaging to the climate. We can choose sustainable consumption, reduce food waste and adopt a plant-based diet, buy products that leave little mark on the planet. If businesses see that this is where the money is going, they will follow.

Our worries will turn into positive energy as we feel part of the growing group of people who are actually doing something – building an urgent and dynamic climate coalition that crosses national borders, cultural differences, and the gap between the old and the young.