ON ART AND ACTIVISM

By Olafur Eliasson, artist, and Kumi Naidoo, activist, former Secretary-General of Amnesty International and former Executive Director of Greenpeace. *Currently, Bosch Academy Fellow and Global Ambassador for Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity.*

Introduction

We find ourselves in a critical moment of overlapping crises. Each crisis cannot be seen as a distinct challenge; the most prevalent crises of the past years – climate change, social injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic and more – have proven to be deeply interconnected.

While there are many positive developments to shout about, this time is also one of conflict and isolation; a breakdown of trust, loss of hope, and feelings of rejection and loneliness, stirred by polarising media landscapes.

To those in the privileged Global North, this is a moment to thoroughly reassess the foundational violence behind the ideas and the wealth that is the basis for their societies today. European colonialism and the global extractive capitalism that is its legacy is significantly responsible for decimating the Earth's ecological integrity and biodiversity. Inevitably, affluent nations must make changes to their patterns of consumption and fossil-fuel-dependent infrastructures. In doing this, industrial nations can learn from indigenous peoples, their knowledge and counsel to live in mutually beneficial relationships with nature.

COP 26 in Glasgow is a definitive moment for heads of state, global leaders, and their teams to make binding decisions to significantly slow down the effects of climate change. Our actions today will shape the course of the next decade and beyond. It is an important opportunity to ask ourselves and one another: how can we work collaboratively across disciplines and geographic, cultural, and national borders, and in a manner that takes into account the needs of multiple generations and of all species, in order to navigate towards a safe and more just future? The climate crisis is a collective action problem – there is no one way to tackle this.

Art and activism – our fields of work and expertise – can heighten attention to and perception of situations that may have been invisible, overlooked or neglected. They often run at different speeds: activism typically has a clear direction and is oriented towards effecting fast systemic changes, while art is slower, offering complex spaces of wonder, questioning, and reflection – individually and collectively.

So we ask ourselves: In the face of the climate crisis, how can the work of artists help create change? What can activism achieve – and can it be done differently? Can art and activism learn from each other?

Kumi Naidoo: It is often said that art has the ability to bridge differences between people and in this way may offer new ways of thinking on the divides found in activism.

Sadly, a lot of the activism we see today is caught in an echo chamber. The biggest mistake we have made – and I include myself here – was mistaking 'access' for 'influence'. As activists, we spend too much time working towards gaining access to people in power to talk to them about what they already know. This process takes up considerable human and other resources, and actually serves governments and other power holders to tick off a box that says they have 'consulted with civil society.'

By the same token, it allows some activists to say that they have lobbied governments or other power holders, since sometimes their funders expect to see this. The entire process has become a ritualistic exercise. Very little positive comes out of these interactions and it creates a false sense of partnership

when there is the absence of a willingness to discuss or engage over power structures, systems and policies that are in place.

So, quite often we are not discussing the systemic and structural changes that are needed to secure justice, rather we are engaged in incremental tinkering – winning some important battles, no doubt, and preventing things from getting much worse, but still clearly losing the overall war for climate justice, economic justice and more.

Olafur Eliasson: When it comes to addressing something as urgent as the climate crisis, I see people turning to art, hoping for it to inspire positive change. I'm really appreciative of that trust in art, of people trusting the spaces of art, whose work in the world, or impact, cannot be broken down into immediately measurable units. I actually think that the word 'transformation' is maybe more fitting than 'change' – a good artwork can evoke transformations in those meeting up with it.

To any encounter with art, we bring a self that is always *becoming with* many, to paraphrase Donna Haraway. It is an embodied, thinking-feeling-sensing self. And if meeting up with the artwork deeply touches you, you will walk away a slightly different person, transformed.

Art can hold spaces for contradiction, for complexity. It can make us aware of overlaps and differences in how we experience the world and ourselves within different cultures. It can elicit reflections on *how* we use our senses and *how* that makes us think and feel. In this way, art does not necessarily have a function or an aim, it does not pursue specific goals, and it also does not need to be shocking in order to be impactful.

Kumi Naidoo: We have seen in activism that often the more newsworthy and shocking actions get more public attention. It should not be a starting point for deciding an action nor the focus of it. What we protest should remain the core of what actions we take. And just because an action has shock value and attracts media attention does not always mean that it has been effective.

Most often, activist actions serve to draw attention to something that would otherwise remain off the radar of the general public – something that would remain shielded from general view and therefore scrutiny, like the action by Greenpeace activists in Greenland and Russia to call for the end of drilling for oil and gas. Had we not gone out into the sea and taken action, it's likely that the oil drilling in the Arctic sea would have remained largely hidden from global public view. We did not set out to shock – in fact, we got a shock when the water cannons were turned on us. We set out to engage in a peaceful, non-violent protest.

Olafur Eliasson: I see a connection between using one's body in traditional forms of activism and in art. By using their bodies to resist and respond to violence, social injustice, and economic exploitation, protesters literally embody their causes.

I was, for instance, inspired by Extinction Rebellion's die-in in front of Tate Modern a few years ago, with everyone arriving on bicycles dressed up as bees and collapsing in front of the museum – they were drawing attention to the extinction of many species, to the loss of biodiversity. It was like a public sculpture, emerging and being un-done again.

I very much relate to this way of working with the body. My artworks would not exist without the embodied visitors, using their full sensorium to sense, feel and think.

Ice Watch, an artwork that I made with the geologist Minik Rosing on three occasions in public space, was an invitation to passersby to engage with big blocks of ancient, frozen water as the ice gradually thawed away – to listen to the ice crackling, releasing air thousands of years old, to touch and smell the melt water.

We pulled several blocks of free-floating glacial ice that had broken away from the ice sheet from the waters of the Nuup Kangerlua fjord, in Greenland, and moved them to public spaces in Copenhagen, 2014, to mark the publication of the UN IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change; in Paris, 2015, on the occasion of the UN Climate Conference COP21; and in London in 2018.

Even then, in the very recent past, the effects of the climate crisis still felt abstract in our Western industrialised societies – something we could not really 'see'. Today, of course, we see and feel the effects in our countries and read regularly about it in the news.

At the time, I was inspired by the work of Elke Weber, Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, who asks fundamental questions about human behaviour and decision-making: When do we engage? When do we ignore or grow numb? Through exploring feelings of proximity and presence, I hoped that encounters with these vulnerable yet beautiful blocks of ice would make the effects of climate change in some way tangible. I was hoping that they would help us recognise that we are part of this huge unruly network called Earth and our mark, our carbon footprint, on Earth is real and the consequences are real.

I believe that art can help tell stories and shape our subjective routes. By engaging with artworks, we can exercise our muscles for imagining otherwise. And this otherwise can be many things; with regard to the climate emergency, it can be imagining new ways of living together and transitioning to forms of communal living that are less predicated on consumption and extraction. And I really think it takes practice. As Yvonne Rainer, the renowned dancer and choreographer, said, '*The mind is a muscle'.*

Kumi Naidoo: I believe people mistakenly think that governments control people primarily through the deployment of the repressive state apparatus: the army, the police and formal laws. We acknowledge that the repressive state apparatus constrains the space for public life; however, the more insidious, more powerful form of control is the framework of education, the framework of religion, social norms and customs and the framework for communications and media.

What is critically needed in activism, in addition to actions that draw public attention to the unjust actions of governments and corporations, is to ensure that we are building a narrative bridge to those that disagree with effective climate action, including addressing the immoral levels of inequality that exist today. Activism cannot be simply about consolidating the base of people who largely already agree with your views and actions. And in this sense activism must be willing to embrace with love and understanding the people who might have been lied to and misled through misinformation to vote for Trump or Brexit. It must be activists' purpose in the current moment of history to win over as many of those who have veered in these directions.

Olafur Eliasson: I've been inspired by the writings of Sarah Schulman, playwright, author and queer activist, who wrote an important book called *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (2016). Schulman focuses on how to handle conflicts, on dealing with trauma and feelings of supremacy – and to do so with the ambition of healing and doing repair-work as communities. She ends the book by stating that 'nothing disrupts dehumanisation more quickly than inviting someone over, looking into their eyes, hearing their voice, and listening.'

I believe that encountering artworks in fact gives us access to that same space of being with difference, with conflict, while being able to listen to the concerns of others. There are moments where we might feel that the artwork is listening to us, and we to it. That it reflects some of our not-yet verbalised emotions. That it can help us cope in situations of emotional stress, of feeling lost, by reflecting our feelings, hosting them, working through them *with us* – and this can be with regard to the climate emergency or with regard to almost any other situation we find ourselves in.

Kumi Naidoo: I would say we are living in the most consequential decade in humanity's history and, according to what the IPCC is saying; what we do in the next 10 years will determine what kind of future we have. And yes, it will also determine the future of work.

So the way I see it is, we still have a window of opportunity and the very existence of activism suggests that collectively, human beings remain hopeful. That there is a better way to not just exist alongside each other, but to thrive and to do so in ways that do not come at the cost of destroying the planet itself.

We need to consider a shift in our mentality from unwittingly disempowering people by how we frame activism. We should consider in the current moment what power people do have. As activists, I believe we should be directing our energy, talent and resources towards harnessing the power and agency people *do* have, not only focusing on how people are exploited, excluded and oppressed.

On a more ephemeral level, activism must also be about humbling ourselves. We have to abandon what we know, and by this I mean we need to drop the idea that development is about those who have power and resources deciding what needs to happen in the lives of people who don't have power and resources, for instance the idea that northern NGOs decide what water security looks like for poor people in a village in Tanzania or Bangladesh. Activism must be based on compassion and empathy interwoven with a sense of humility and curiosity. If we think we have all the answers, then we're probably not asking the right questions.

Olafur Eliasson: You might say that there are only ever partial answers. Culture is such a fundamentally messy presence in all parts of society – and of course it has its own biases, systemic inequalities, and complexities. But the fact that it's messy doesn't reduce its ability to support and inspire us – it is, in fact, a type of power. Artists, dancers, musicians, filmmakers, writers – they're able to reflect the situations and aspirations and feelings of people and communities who are marginalised or overlooked. They create cultural spaces that can host differences and conflict, that embrace contentious views and offer platforms for difficult discussions. They envisage new narratives and modes of being and living together.

I am confident that these other ways of imagining, of being, of doing, and of living together can also inspire the immense tasks of slowing down the effects of climate change, preventing further destruction of other lifeforms on our planet, and ensuring that Earth remains habitable for future generations.

Art and activism can work together and alongside each other to visualise, make perceptible, and tell these marginalised stories while helping people make sense of the world that we're entangled with, whether on small or large scales – online, in the street, in public buildings, in theatres, community centres, or in museums. This is incredibly powerful, not least if we join up with others in sprawling, unruly networks across the world.

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