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# "CLIMATE SUMMIT ART," ARTS AND THE CARBON INDUSTRIES, GUSTAV METZGER AND ÓLAFUR ELÍASSON

**Linn Burchert**

Since 1972, when international political conferences on climate and the environment first were established, artists have taken the opportunity to create artworks to be publicly exhibited during these political events. While the conferences initially took place at five to ten year intervals, in 1995, the UN established the Conference of Party (COP) as an annual international forum for delegates from politics, science and economics as well as civil society to negotiate on measures to take against climate change. While the artistic projects presented alongside these summits can be seen as a self-determined way of using art as a statement about these huge political media events, at the same time, they are deeply entangled within economic and political structures. My analysis of "Climate Summit Art" focuses on the material and institutional prerequisites of these artistic projects, especially their imbrication within specific cultural-political and corporate funding programs. These contribute significantly to the development, design and reception of the projects, as this essay attempts to substantiate. The economic and political infrastructures of production and display decisively determine which artworks will and can be presented to the public.

I will focus on Ólafur Elíasson's re-stagings of *Ice Watch* (2014, 2015, 2018) at the climate-environmental summits, taking into account discussions about the artwork's carbon footprint as well as its sponsors. This will shed new light on the phenomenology and levels of meaning that accrete in *Ice Watch*. At the same time, I will situate Elíasson's work exemplarily within the heterogeneous history of what I call "Climate Summit Art," using Gustav Metzger's early position as a point of departure and comparison for later works.

In 1972, London-based artist Metzger drafted a project called *Stockholm, Project June*, reminiscent of his earlier car-work *Mobbile* (1970), for the first so-called Earth Summit, which took place during fifteen days in June.<sup>1</sup> The concept envisioned 120 cars with engines running day and night for fourteen days, their exhaust fumes guided into a plastic cube. After this "first phase"—as Metzger called it—on the night of the 14th day, a "second phase" was to begin during which the cars would be taken into the now closed plastic cube structure, their engines filled with petrol and running: "If by noon on the 15th, the cars







Gustav Metzger, *Project Stockholm, June (Phase 1)*, 1972/2007. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 8. Scaffolding, polythene sheets, 100 cars. Photo: Courtesy of Sharjah Art Museum.









Ólafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, *Ice Watch*, 2018.  
Supported by Bloomberg, Installation: Bankside, outside  
Tate Modern. © 2018 Ólafur Eliasson.

have not gone up in flames, small bombs are to be hurled into the sculpture,” the artist explained.<sup>2</sup> While initially the project was not meant to be produced, the concept remained, and a model of *Stockholm, Project June* was exhibited at the *Three Life Situations* show at Gallery House London in Spring 1972 as well as at documenta V in Kassel that same summer.

Twenty years later, when the third Earth Summit<sup>3</sup> took place in Rio de Janeiro, Metzger applied for funding from the UN and UNESCO to present a version of this sculpture (without explosions). The Brazilian Government, the UN and the UNCED received 364 artistic and curatorial proposals of which about 183 projects were ultimately accepted,<sup>4</sup> but Metzger’s conception was not among them.<sup>5</sup> Some of the prominent projects produced were Agnes Denes’ *Tree Mountain Project* in Finland, the *Arte Amazonas* exhibition in Rio de Janeiro and many other cultural programs that focused on intercultural exchange and expressed a sense of a globalized world community. We can only speculate as to what made the committee reject Metzger’s proposal, apart from technical issues. Successful “eco-artists” back then focused on land reclamation works and planting campaigns. Moreover, since *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 documentary, it was impossible to ignore *Project June*’s conspicuous connection to Nazi experiments with gas chambers and the German death camps. Although not originally intended, this added new, complex levels of meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Back in 1992, the artist emphasized his environmental approach and stated that with this project,

[w]e must face a contradiction. Wherever the work is to be placed—in a town or outside—it will lead to a considerable increase in pollution. Understandably, this will lead to controversies, and we must anticipate some angry reactions to the plan. We shall point to the hundreds of thousands of vehicles which people have come to accept as part of daily life in cities. Apart from controversy on the environmental aspects, we can expect reactions to the “waste” involved: the cars merely standing there; the amount of fuel used up. Again, we can respond by questioning the value of the “normal” use of the car.<sup>7</sup>

Metzger thus anticipated a discussion on issues of “scale” and ethics. It is precisely this expectation that connects Metzger’s early climate summit contribution to Eliasson’s *Ice Watch*. *Ice Watch* is the title of the interventions into urban spaces, starting in 2014, that the Danish-Icelandic artist together with Greenlandic geologist Minik Rosing have repeated at several locations for various occasions. Each time, they have transported up to 24 large blocks of ice, weighing about 110 tons in total, from the Nuuk Fjord in Greenland to a European capital. In 2014 with UN funding, they installed *Ice Watch* at City Hall Square



in Copenhagen for the UN Report on Climate Change. In 2015, the project took place in central Paris at Place du Panthéon, coinciding with COP21; in 2018—at the same time as the COP24 climate summit in Katowice, Poland—the artwork was staged at two locations in London, outside the Tate Modern and in front of the headquarters of Bloomberg Philanthropies, which partly sponsored the work's 2015 and 2018 iterations.

*Ice Watch*'s second supporter is Julie's Bicycle, a London-based non-profit that has supported public lectures and events since 2006, endeavouring to strengthen the 2015 Paris Climate Declaration through funding of cultural resources. The 1.5°C target to combat global warming is its central guideline. Julie's Bicycle, therefore, provides practical advice to cultural practitioners on how to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> in their activities. This would seem to stand in contradiction to Eliasson's work, which has attracted indignant criticism from environmentalists due to its wasteful climate approach.<sup>8</sup> However, the emissions the work produces were, of course, not meant to provoke criticism of the work itself—the publication of estimated figures was to be used to reflect on

human impact on the climate in general, at first glance comparable to Metzger's approach. In this case, the sponsor was explicitly commissioned to estimate the work's carbon footprint, "inclusive of the transportation of the ice, the production, installation and the transport of the artists and crew."<sup>9</sup> The forty tons of carbon emissions for *Ice Watch London* were equal—per ice block—to "one person flying from London to Greenland to witness the ice melting of the Greenland ice sheet;"<sup>10</sup> for the Paris edition it was thirty tons.<sup>11</sup> According to Julie's Bicycle, that would equal 52 students flying to and from Greenland, which then was set in relation to the 100,000 visitors who visited *Ice Watch* on site and many more online. Julie's Bicycle states that the transparency in figures, contributes to the "integrity behind the work." What is more, the charity provided recommendations to Eliasson on how to further reduce carbon emissions in his work, and so Eliasson made a donation to the Woodland Trust to "compensate for the carbon impact."<sup>12</sup> As art historians Kaya Barry and Jondi Keane point out, against that background, the carbon footprint could indeed be regarded as "*meagre*"<sup>13</sup>—basically any provocation seems to be appeased.

Ólafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, *Ice Watch*, 2018. Supported by Bloomberg, Installation: City of London, outside Bloomberg's European headquarters. © 2018 Ólafur Eliasson. Photo: Charlie Forgham-Bailey.



In *Ice Watch*, we can see clearly how the political means—in the form of policies, compensations, and donations—become part of an artwork. Thus, we also can see how the concomitant underlying ideologies (such as compensating the carbon emissions of one action through another) become integrated into the work. Yet, in presenting these direct connections between art and contemporary politics, we only scratch the surface of an artwork's position within climate discourse and political events designed to address the environmental crisis. As Barry and Keane point out, *Ice Watch* has to be regarded in terms of a "tourist spectacle and momentary attention garnered in the global media cycle."<sup>14</sup> They rightly point out that the debate around the carbon footprint of *Ice Watch* might distract from another, overarching aspect of the work and its maker, namely "the intensely human phenomenon, in which one's own success, accumulation of wealth, and notoriety as an artist make endeavours susceptible to being co-opted and capable of turning experimental explorations of the world into megaphones for spruiking [i.e. advertising, l.b.] values for growth-oriented systems."<sup>15</sup> Yet these authors' analysis of Elíasson's work remains on this symbolic level and does not delve further into what they call a lack of "modesty," which is understood as cooperation with growth-oriented systems. What they are hinting at might better be expressed as a deep and material complicity with—at least some part of—today's "eco art" with the global economy and green washing practices.

Alongside Julie's Bicycle, Bloomberg Philanthropies acted as a sponsor for the 2015 and 2018 versions of *Ice Watch*. The charity's founder, Michael Bloomberg, is a former mayor of New York City and head of a multi-billion-dollar media company. In addition to the areas of environment, health, education and governance, his philanthropic foundation is also committed to the arts: "Our Arts program utilizes innovative partnerships and bold approaches to place arts at the centre of economic growth and empower artists and cultural organizations."<sup>16</sup> Bloomberg is also a key player in the so-called Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), "a coalition of 94 of the world's biggest cities against climate change."<sup>17</sup> As historian Benoît Bréville points out, C40 is mainly sponsored by the private sector and is meant to "enhance a city's brand image and awareness, key assets in the competition to attract investors, businesses, skilled workers, students or major events that yield economic dividends."<sup>18</sup> Consciously or not, Elíasson exposes his art precisely to this international competition and branding context, which propagates the globalist practices that are responsible for a major share of climate change. Moreover, his work is funded by one of its magnates, a sponsorship designed to demonstrate Bloomberg's "commitment" to climate protection.

As investigative journalist Naomi Klein points out, Bloomberg occupies a rather dubious—to say the least—position in relation to today's climate debates and actions. While Bloomberg Philanthropies' investment arm Willett Advisors LLC invests primarily in oil and natural gas, Bloomberg is part of C40, supporting and co-publishing reports and research on the economic risks associated with climate change for the United States:

It's not simply that Bloomberg is actively snapping up fossil fuel assets even as he funds reports warning that climate change makes for "risky business." It's that those gas assets may well have increased in value as a result of Bloomberg's giving, what with EDF championing natural gas as a replacement for coal and the Sierra Club spending tens of millions of Bloomberg's dollars shutting down coal plants.<sup>19</sup>

Électricité de France (EDF) receives generous support from Bloomberg for fracking natural gas.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, EDF is—like Bloomberg—an important lobbyist at UN climate summits and part of the fossil fuel industry that "blocked binding agreements and prevented ambitious international action."<sup>21</sup> Its own cultural foundation in Paris—Foundation EDF—organized a contemporary art show with the title *Climats Artificiels* during the 2015 summit.<sup>22</sup> Both Bloomberg and EDF position themselves as leaders in environmental protection while profiting greatly from the exploitation of fossil fuels. Elíasson and other artists exhibiting in such corporate contexts do something similar, though on a smaller scale. At first glance, this might not undermine the effect and reception of an artwork, which indeed could still provoke thinking and action on climate change; however, *Ice Watch* is—despite other claims by the artist—not created to do so.

The ice exhibited in Copenhagen, London and Paris was broken ice that had already melted into the ocean, which strengthens the overall feeling of "powerlessness and passivity" in the face of eye-witnessing inexorable loss. As Barry and Keane point out, *Ice Watch* "holds up *nature* as something to be admired for the rarity and beauty, separated out from an individual human's actions."<sup>23</sup> Despite its melancholic and gloomy message of loss, *Ice Watch*, paradoxically, was mainly used to circulate positive images. These go hand in hand with the objectives the artist published on his website: "raising awareness, being with, collaboration, community, compassion, connecting space."<sup>24</sup> Elíasson's intervention and Bloomberg's funding guidelines thus conjoin in the goal of transforming public space through art. The numerous photographs that were chosen to publicize Elíasson's work tend to express people's emotional approach to the slowly melting ice, their shared amazement when they touch the pieces of glacier and listen to it, and—last but not least—the images appear as a staged presentation of a socially diverse community. The artwork becomes a meeting place, a place of exchange and, at the same time, seems to pursue the ethical goal of pointing out abstract environmental problems without raising anti-capitalist critique, which makes Bloomberg's branding mission appear accomplished.

All this distinguishes Elíasson's approach from that of Metzger, whose *Project June* does not convey a positive feeling of community: Metzger uses carbon emissions as provocation, not as a matter of compensation. Elíasson's exhibition of melting ice blocks during political mega-media events must be seen within the overall project of Bloomberg's enterprises. It also shows the artist's uncritical affirmation of current political policies as an integral part of his work, a practice through which the politics of his sponsors such as Bloomberg's are publicly



legitimized. The realization of *Project June* in 2007 was also made possible by oil and gas companies, although not at a climate summit but in the context of a Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. Yet, both works, *Ice Watch* and *Project June*, demonstrate the current importance of “cultural capital” for multinational corporations as well as the fossil fuel sector, and should make us reflect on the implications of austerity politics in culture and culture’s dependence on non-governmental funds.

1. This mobile work was iterated several times. [Online]: [bit.ly/2OSJW6C](http://bit.ly/2OSJW6C).
2. Gustav Metzger, “Second Floor,” in *Gustav Metzger. Writings 1953–2016* (Mathieu Copeland and Clément Diré, eds), (JRP|Éditions, Geneva, 2019), 437.
3. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).
4. James Brooke, “Arts Invade Rio for Earth Summit,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1992. [Online]: [nyti.ms/2NkGHDY](http://nyti.ms/2NkGHDY).
5. Metzger’s concept (i.e., its “first phase”) was finally realized for the 2007 8th edition of Sharjah Biennial *Still Life. Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change* (United Arab Emirates). For a critical take on further levels of meaning as well as problems connected with this exhibition context, see: Mark Godfrey, “Protest and Survive. An interview with Gustav Metzger, one of the key figures of postwar British art,” *Frieze*, June 6, 2007. [Online]: [bit.ly/2OFCtaK](http://bit.ly/2OFCtaK).
6. Ibid. Metzger, the child of Polish Jews, had to flee Germany as a child in 1936.
7. Gustav Metzger, “Earth minus Environment. A Sculptural Project for the UN Earth Summit Rio de Janeiro, June 1992,” in *Gustav Metzger. Writings 1953–2016*, op. cit., 542.
8. Christopher P. Heuer, “A Post-Critical Arctic,” in *Ecologies. Agents. Terrains* (Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach, eds) (Clark Studies in the Visual Arts, Williamstown, 2018), 302. Heuer refers to: Joseph Nechvatal, “Ólafur Eliasson’s Sundial of Melting Icebergs Clocks in at Half-Past Wasteful,” *Hyperallergic*, December 9, 2015. [Online]: [bit.ly/37bYgNo](http://bit.ly/37bYgNo); and David Balzer, “The Carbon Footprint of Art. Are the creative industries the world’s most hypocritical polluters?,” *Canadian Art*, February 20, 2017. [Online]: [bit.ly/3aikqjh](http://bit.ly/3aikqjh). Also see Kaya Barry and Jondi Keane, *Creative Measures of the Anthropocene. Art, Mobilities, and Participatory Geographies* (Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2019), 201.
9. Barry and Keane, idem, 200f.
10. Julie’s Bicycle, “Inside the Ice Watch Carbon Footprint,” February 2019. [Online]: [bit.ly/2ZehpKp](http://bit.ly/2ZehpKp).
11. Catherine Botrill, “The Carbon Footprint of Ice Watch Exhibited at the UN Climate Change Summit (COP21) Paris, December 2015,” ed. Julie’s Bicycle [Online]: [bit.ly/3tWtd24](http://bit.ly/3tWtd24).
12. Julie’s Bicycle, op. cit., 11.
13. Barry and Keane, op. cit., 201.
14. Ibid., 202.
15. Ibid., 203.
16. See Bloomberg Philanthropies website: [bloomberg.org/2N6IUTN](http://bloomberg.org/2N6IUTN).
17. Benoît Bréville, “The return of the city-state,” originally published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. [Online]: [bit.ly/2NpWGkg](http://bit.ly/2NpWGkg).
18. “These groups have the support of the World Bank, the UN and multinationals (sponsors of the last C40 mayoral summit included Ikea, Microsoft, Google, Velux and Dell Technologies), and are powerful advocates of the metropolitan cult of innovation that brings together local governments and businesses. The private sector is so keen on city diplomacy that it has set up its own groups, including IT giant Cisco’s City Protocol and the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities network.”
19. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything. Capital vs. the Climate* (Simon & Schuster, London, 2014), 235f.
20. Ibid., 216.
21. Aitec, Attac France, Corporate Europe Observatory, Observatoire de multinationales and Transnational Institute, publishers of “Lobby Planet Paris. A Guide to Corporate COP21,” November 2015, 10–13. [Online]: [bit.ly/3pdoh5i](http://bit.ly/3pdoh5i).
22. Camille Morineau (ed.), *Climats artificiels*, exhibition catalogue, 4.10.2015–29.2.2016, Fondation EDF Paris 2015.
23. Kaya Barry and Jondi Keane, op. cit., 201f.
24. See Ólafur Eliasson’s website: [bit.ly/37gPvBI](http://bit.ly/37gPvBI).

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