

Comment

Artists and now also activists to contrast global warming

Alessandra Drioli

Artists create new aesthetics to communicate new messages and new concerns. Apprehension about the climate, climate changes, global warming and a disposition to anxiously running after an ideal sustainable development are now part of the issues we all now experience daily and discuss with a certain degree of anxiety. And the highly sensitive antennae of the artists have quickly realised that, bringing it to another level, and are now committed on many fields to making their voice be heard and to raising ethical and social issues, also regarding the scientific instruments man possesses to manipulate nature. So they have now accessed the group of special interlocutors in the dialogue between science and society, playing the role of interpreters of topical issues that require a widespread awareness and the construction of a scientific citizenship able to cope with an inevitable challenge such as the implementation of a “sustainable” model of life. Evidently, artistic sensitivities and trends like that do not stem from nothing. Behind, they have a complex and multifaceted tradition being reinterpreted by the most recent artistic experimentations either as its continuation or its opposition. Thus, certainly many elements of Land Art, but also more in general of Environment art and Public Art, but even of Fluxus and Pop Art, resound more or less strongly in contemporary artistic research reflecting on the “global warming” of the planet.

Perhaps not by chance in 2006 did the USA see the establishment of two non-profit organizations - *The Canary Project* and *Precipice Alliance* – whose mission is the production of visual media, events and works of art aimed at raising awareness among the public on the climate change and at boosting research on possible solutions.

The Canary Project stems from an idea by Edward Morris and Susannah Sayler who, from New York, coordinate a quite large group of artists, scientific consultants, researchers, volunteers, sponsors. But why this name? The reference is to canaries, birds once used by miners as methane detectors to indicate when mortal levels of it were reached within mines. The works by this group are aimed at highlighting a similar risk threshold, by bearing witness of the effects and the dangers of climate changes for our own survival. Just as the image of the statue located on the banks of the river Waal, in the Netherlands, which marks the level beyond which the waters will cause a flooding in the nearby city of Zaltbommel.

Here is a quotation from the organisation website: “Art has the capacity to penetrate received notions, generate media attention and create lasting visceral and emotional impact - all of which can be a more effective catalyst to action than mere rational apprehension and help people understand we live within nature and not beside, over, or against it.” Their goals include the spreading of correct information on climate change and mobilising the population to take more action to promote sustainable development.

Precipice Alliance, sponsored by the New York Foundation for the Arts, debuted with the work by Mary Ellen Carrol. A large neon installation reading “IT IS GREEN THINKS NATURE EVEN IN THE DARK” was shining from the windows of five buildings of the American Can factory (CANCO lofts) in Jersey City, New Jersey. Whereas we still are awaiting the next project, its founders have described the reasons that have led to the creation of Precipice Alliance as follows. Artist Joel Sternfeld explained: “Like everybody, I’d been following the predictions about global warming out of the corner of my eye for the last 20 years. But after I went to the UN conference on climate change in Montreal in December 2005, I knew I had to do something. I had no idea there was so little time left to prevent irreversible catastrophic consequences”. “Public awareness is absolutely essential in creating solutions” added Donna Wingate, executive director for the project.

Aside from these two organisations there are also many artists – more or less famous – that individually carry out research in this field. Among the names of the Olympus of art there is Olafur Eliasson who, already with *Weather Project* in 2003, demonstrated a high sensibility on the climate issue, although it was with *Car Project* in 2006 that he dealt more specifically with this issue.

With *Weather Project*, the artist devised and installed in the Turbine hall of Tate Modern in London an incredible multi-sensory journey. The installation was implemented with two hundred monofrequency light bulbs placed behind a circular screen, a mirror and smoke gases. The result: above, on the background of the exhibition area, there was a huge artificial sun wrapped by steam which blurred the people's figures. All around, a monochromatic light which – according to the air currents and temperature – could thicken in fog banks, generating clouds with unexpected shapes.

On the other hand, *In Your mobile expectations: BMW H2R Project* Eliasson has replaced a car bodywork with a thin ice layer. It is a hydrogen-propelled racing care, developed by BMW to break speed records and, at the same time, to direct its steps towards the future in terms of sustainable mobility. The work was presented within a refrigerated chamber at a temperature of ten degrees below zero. The energy used was obtained from renewable sources and the monofrequency light located within the sculpture caught the eye on the continuous process of melting and freezing. Hence, a product of the most advanced automotive technology created an art installation whose aim was to talk to the public, in lyrical and sophisticated tones, about mobility, renewable energies and the relationship between automotive manufacturing and global warming.

Olafur Eliasson believes that “by merging arts, design, social and environmental issues, you can contribute to a different way of thinking and of feeling and experiencing cars as they are and to see them against the background of the time and space we live in. After all, I don't believe that objects exist in isolation. They are always part of a complex set of physical and mental relationships, they change according to the context and depend on the expectations and the values of their users. They include relativity and the passing of the time.”

Chris Jordan, an American photographer, has documented with his shots the devastations produced by the Katrina hurricane, to subsequently engage in the report of the disturbing fate awaiting some widespread commodities in the US. The originality of the work by Jordan lies in using the subject of statistics as a means for portrayal. Hence, as statistics say Americans consume two million plastic bottles every five minute, Jordan put together an apocalyptic plastic sea gathering in a single picture precisely two million bottles. Indeed, not by chance last April was he selected by the National Geographic channels to celebrate the Earth Day in Rome at the International FotoGrafia Festival. Chris Jordan believes “that these pictures may have a different impact than the numbers alone we find everyday on books and newspapers. Through very large and detailed prints, assembled with thousands of smaller pictures, the project is to emphasise the role of the individual in an ever more gigantic society, incomprehensible and overwhelming.” (http://www.arapacis.it/mostre_ed_eventi/mostre/running_the_numbers).

Whereas Sebastian Copeland with *Antarctica, The Global Warning* of 2006 (<http://www.antarcticabook.com>) reported with a series of charming yet disturbing shots on the disastrous effects caused by glaciers melting, in early 2008 Vanessa Chimera and Paolo Bertocchi installed in the Bologna Marconi Airport a huge number of open umbrellas collected on the streets after a heavy shower. Hanging above the head of passengers they had embroidery showing the diagrams from a study on the history of rainfall in the regions undergoing considerable climatic changes. They are there up above in the air, forming a dark cloud, brooding and ominous, overturned as they are bound to collect the little water coming down, yet ready to fall if Nature decides to suddenly pour streams of rain on them.

Certainly they are artists, but also and above all activists that take action to warn people against a series of dangers that are at the gates of our life using the most different instruments, styles and tones to spur us to a single task: understanding and safeguarding our planet.

Author

Alessandra Drioli works at the Museum of Città della Scienza in Naples since 1997. She was a member of the design group for the present museum set-up inaugurated in 2001 for which she planned the artistic references; she worked as an assistant to the Director of the museum, Manager of the Exhibition Areas and of the Special Projects, participating in European project and in the planning of several exhibitions, to which she has always contributed her personal education she received as an art historian. Furthermore, in the past few years she has carried out an interesting research activity on art & science, holding speeches at national and international conferences, lecturing in master courses, university and post-university courses, and obtaining her Doctor's degree at the Seconda Università di Napoli with a thesis on interactive art. She boasts also a long collaboration with the journal *Arte Mondadori*. E-mail: driolia@tin.it.