The Economist

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Climate change and art

Food for thought

ISLE OF SKYE
Just like politics, sometimes art is most effective when it is local

WHAT TO WEAR to dine on the ocean floor? The invitation warned of the “changing weather” of Scotland’s west coast. Oilskins and a sou’wester might have been appropriate. Or wellies. Or perhaps just bare feet. Over ten days in September 2017, Alon Schwabe and Daniel Fernández Pascual, the former an Israeli-born dancer and performance artist, the latter a Spanish architect, served meals with a message to anyone who, at low tide, was prepared to walk out into Bayfield Bay, off Portree, the capital of the Isle of Skye, to eat at their “oyster table”.

The tabletops and benches that were the set for their performance were actually metal cages filled with oysters (pictures). At high tide they were completely submerged, and drew in seaweed and assorted molluscs. When the tide went out, the mesh became a dining room. Surrounded by the two artists, the two guests, who work under the name Cooking Sections and call themselves “spatial practitioners”, set to work shucking shellfish and handing round kelp lasagne, nori crackers and scones made from sea lettuce and seaweed butter, all the while keeping up a practised storytelling routine.

Their theme was how diets should be updated in response to climate change. Instead of herbivores or carnivores, the pair say, people should consider becoming “climavores”—eating more locally sourced food and changing menus according to the season. Their interest in the idea began with a project among the Inuit in Alaska in 2014. Later this year they will perform at the Venice Biennale; next year they will set out their stall at Tate Modern in London.

Ice and fire
For centuries artists generally saw nature as the work of God. Today many discern the hand of man behind polluted seashores and vanishing species. But making art out of climate change, rather than from nature itself, has not proved straightforward. While it is useful material for apocalyptic films, climate change makes a tough subject for painting and sculpture. The scale and complexity mean that depicting it in visual terms is hard—as the bedraggled rubber squad and limp flora on show at Venice inadvertently attest. Equally challenging, for those whose aim is didactic, is finding the most fitting artistic way to raise awareness of the crisis.

The world’s best known climate-change artist is Olafur Eliasson. He began his career at 15, selling gouaches of landscapes he had encountered on walks with his Icelandic father, a painter. Later he photographed shrinking glaciers and polluted rivers. But it was his experiments with geometry and architecture, beginning in his late 20s, that led Mr Eliasson to make big conceptual pieces that use light, water and varying temperatures to create sensory experiences for his audiences. The “Weather Project” (2003) employed a vast “sun” to flood the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London with yellow light, hinting at a future of ever higher temperatures. Audiences threw themselves into the performance. They lay on the floor, made star shapes with their bodies and took endless selfies—forms of engagement that have since become the norm at exhibitions around the world.

The “Weather Project” was the first large-scale effort to deal with climate change in contemporary art. Fifteen years later, Mr Eliasson brought 24 massive chunks of ice from Greenland to the banks of the Thames in a work called “Ice Watch London”. As the ice melted outside Tate Modern, performance and protest fused. “I believe in challenging people’s perspectives and the numbness of the political sphere,” Mr Eliasson says. He notes that far more people saw the installation in London than would have done in Greenland—but some critics pointed out the cost in energy of transporting the ice across the Atlantic (there were installations in...
Copenhagen and Paris, too. Less well known, but in their own, quieter way as effective, are the growing cadre of artists who are developing pieces that engage directly with communities. "Climate-change art doesn’t have to be shouty," says Aaron Cezar, director of the Delfina Foundation in London, which has arranged the performance-art programme in Venice this year. "It’s about making complex ideas simple, and about connecting."

You are what you eat
Consider, for example, "The Edible Hut" in Detroit, Michigan. The hut is a community and performance space with an edible roof made of plants, erected by Mira Barak, who works under the name Matterology. Or Renzo Martens, a Dutch film-maker and conceptual artist, who works in Congo, drawing attention to the ecological impact of the palm-oil industry. Or Vivien Sansour, a film-maker and storyteller who has collaborated with farmers in Honduras, Uruguay and the West Bank. Through her narratives she encourages them to grow heritage varieties of vegetables and share their seeds, thereby earning the nickname, the "Seed Queen of Palestine."

This is the expanding niche—between big-time pyrotechnics and the struggle of figurative art to capture the scope and peril of climate change—in which Cooking Sections operate. Their climavore project was commissioned by Atlas Arts, a Scottish cultural agency, which stumped up £150,000 ($186,000) of public subsidy. The artists wanted to draw attention to the particular problems of the seas around Skype: increasing acidification and toxic algae blooms caused by rising temperatures, as well as the harm done to the ocean floor around the island by intense salmon farming that continues to grow.

As part of the performance, they asked Ben Oakes, a local scallop-diver, to give talks focused on the damage inflicted by scallop-dredging. A seaweed forager spoke of the many possible uses for kelp, including flavouring gin. Three of the island’s best-known chefs undertook to stop serving farmed salmon, creating special “climavore” menus instead. Cooking Sections themselves gave a number of workshops in the local high school about cooking with foraged ingredients; three school-leavers are being offered "climavore" apprenticeships each year in nearby restaurants.

The project has succeeded, the artists believe, because it has engaged with locals, as well as with some of Skype’s 500,000 visitors a year. "It has injected a real energy into the conversation, about how people might do things differently in the future," Mr Schwabe says. Mr Elliasz-Peterek’s verdict on climate activism in art is more oracular. "The madman of yesterday," he says, "will be the visionary of tomorrow."

Booksellers and the law
There she blows
A controversial book about IMDB is published at last in Britain
It is a dry name for what may prove the beast of the century. The IMDB affair, involving the alleged theft of $4.5bn from the Malaysian state development fund of that name, has feuded a Malaysian prime minister, ensnared Goldman Sachs and embarrassed Hollywood bigwigs. An impeccably researched book on the scandal—by Tom Wright and Bradley Hope of the Wall Street Journal—came out last year. But not in Britain, thanks to its strict libel laws and the efforts of its fearsome “reputation-management” industry. That omission was rectified on September 12th with the delayed publication of the British edition, even as legal threats continued to fly.

"Billing Dollar Whale" focuses on the role of Mr Low (pictured), a baby-faced Malaysian playboy who American prosecutors allege was the mastermind of the misappropriation. Mr Low, a fugitive sought by Interpol (and believed to be in China), has been charged with money-laundering related offences in America and Malaysia. He maintains his innocence. His spokesman says the book is "trial-by-media at its worst" and "guilt by lifestyle". Among other extravagances, Mr Low threw lavish parties for bankers and celebrities, showering them with gifts, including a Picasso (since returned) for Leonardo DiCaprio.

The problems for the book’s British release began when the local arm of its publisher, Hachette, declined to distribute it on behalf of the company’s American division because of legal threats from several people it mentioned. Scribe, a plucky independent house that also published an unflattering portrayal of the billionaire Koch brothers, later picked up the baton.

The other source of discouragement was a campaign led by Schillings, a British law firm acting for Mr Low. In a more unusually aggressive even by British standards. Schillings bombarded not only the publisher but also distributors, in Britain and elsewhere, with threatening letters. Several booksellers received reams of missives, some hand-delivered, which advised that suggesting Mr Low was guilty of fraud was "outrageously defamatory. Selling the book would potentially interfere "in the proper administration of justice in the United States". Some vendors were warned against categorising the book as "true crime". Many, by Interpol, were spooked. Amazon decided against selling the book in Britain (and some other European countries) after Hachette refused to indemnify it against legal action.

Free-speech campaigners have been moaned this assault on bookshops, not least because Schillings’s threats appear to rest on shaky legal foundations, even in Britain. The Defamation Act of 2013 states, in effect, that distributors cannot be targetted unless it is impossible to go after the publisher, author or editor. For all the bombast, Mr Low is not believed to have sued or even tried to sue Hachette, Scribe, Messrs Wright and Hope, or anyone else involved. Schillings declined to comment. But this is the only known case of lawyers in Britain targeting book distributors on defamation grounds since the law of 2013 was passed.

In the run-up to the British release, Scribe issued a statement reassuring British booksellers that they are on safe legal ground. Most, including Amazon, are now willing to stock "Billions Dollar Whale". (A few brave shops have done so already, using copies ordered from America.) Sarah Braybrooke of Scribe says orders from British outlets are "excellent".

Publication in the spiritual home of the libel complaint does not, however, mean Mr Low will necessarily consider his efforts wasted. "Knocking a few stockists out of the loop for a time by maximising pressure on them may be the best he could have hoped for," says one media lawyer. The campaign, he reckons, was probably always more about damage limitation than legal redress. "It’s not clear to me how someone on the run, facing criminal charges and wanted by Interpol, is able to do this," Ms Braybrooke observes.

The fight goes on. Schillings continues to fire off letters, recently sending another batch to bookshops around the world to coincide with an updated edition. Scribe has received ten letters in the past six weeks, mostly demanding that it comply with data-protection laws by handing over all personal information it holds on Mr Low. "It’s intimidating," says Mr Hope; "but it’s also good publicity for our book."