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**Author(s)**

Edward Christie

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**About the author(s)**

Edward Christie is a PhD candidate in History of Art at University College London.

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# Art and the climate crisis

by Edward Christie • 02.01.2020

The text panel that opens *Eco-Visionaries: Confronting a Planet in a State of Emergency* at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, reads much like an excerpt from an environmental activist group manifesto:

We are facing an ecological emergency. According to the United Nations, if we want to avoid a climate breakdown, carbon emissions must reach zero in the next 30 years. This is not only an environmental catastrophe that could impact future generations, but one that would drastically affect our own. We need to act, but we also need to understand the scale of this complex problem in order to define the changes that must be made.

The text goes on to promise that the exhibition will illuminate how works by architects, artists and designers respond to this call to action in three main ways: by critiquing the causes of climate change; by making the scope of the issue visible; and by pointing towards visions of how we can respond and adapt to climate breakdown.

The presence of a such a progressive curatorial statement within the Royal Academy – an institution that has served as a beacon of Britain’s mainstream art establishment since its founding in 1768 – should be celebrated as a demonstration of the popularity of environmentalism. Even a year ago, this public commitment to climate activism would have been difficult to predict. It was as recently as August 2018 that Greta Thunberg first protested alone outside the Swedish Parliament, marking the start of the ‘School strike for the climate’ movement that has since inspired the participation of millions of young people; and two months later ninety-four academics from across British universities signed a public denouncement of the government’s failure to effectively respond to the ecological crisis, marking the inception of Extinction Rebellion.

*Eco-Visionaries* should also be lauded as a pioneering example of sustainable exhibition practice. Spearheaded by Delvendahl Martin Architects and the graphic design studio Daly & Lyon, the exhibition designers have followed a rigorous sustainability strategy, which minimises both the show’s carbon footprint and the amount of waste it generates. The impact of this approach is evident throughout the exhibition: plinths and furniture have been salvaged from previous events **FIG. 1**, boards for text panels have

been made from one hundred per cent recycled paper-derived substrates, and old exhibition banners have been shredded and re-used to create partitions in the galleries [FIG. 2](#).

The urgent tone that opens the exhibition continues into its first main room, where visitors are initially confronted by HeHe's *Domestic Catastrophe No.3: The Laboratory Planet*, a slowly rotating globe in an aquarium filled with green fluorescein tracing dye, which reads as polluted water or a toxic atmosphere [FIG. 3](#). This dystopian image of a dying planet is made even more grave as it is accompanied by a sound recording of Clara Rockmore's haunting theremin instrumental performance of Camille Saint-Saëns's *Le Cygne* ('The Swan'), which in this context evokes humanity's generally apathetic attitude towards climate breakdown.

But the exhibition's focus on inspiring action soon shifts towards a discursive approach, and the show becomes an attempt to map the conditions and implications of the climate crisis. A major question is asked in each of the exhibition's three main rooms: How can art be used to make visible the local and global dimensions of climate change; how might art help humanity to confront mass extinction; and, in the face of our exponentially growing population, how can art support the innovation of sustainable approaches to agriculture and building?

At its best, the exhibition points towards real answers to these formidable conundrums by illuminating potential solutions. For example, *Biogas Power Plant*, which has been produced by the Portuguese architectural group SKREI, is a prototype for an individual biogas production unit that transforms domestic waste into energy. Also of note is Futurefarmers' video *Soil Procession*, which documents soil being ceremonially carried from farms across Norway to found Losæter in Oslo – an urban farming project that encourages the development of sustainable and community-driven ways of organising societies [FIG. 4](#). Works such as these stand out for their focus on interdisciplinarity and demonstrate that a pragmatic approach to artistic practice can be fostered by bringing together art and science.

At its worst, however, the exhibition presents works that succumb to fantasy or mere philosophising. Pinar Yoldas's mixed-media sculptures, for example, imagine the evolution of organisms able to digest petroleum-derived plastics, which would thrive on consumer waste and petrochemical pollution [FIG. 5](#). In 2016 scientists discovered a bacterium that could consume polyethylene terephthalate (PET), a common plastic used in bottles and clothing.<sup>1</sup> However, rather than supporting the development of this research into a workable approach to recycling, Yoldas's sculptures celebrate the imaginary possibilities of plastic pollution. This investment is suggested by the otherworldliness of Yoldas's

so-called 'plastivores', which loosely resemble existing organisms and are presented in futuristic and illuminated vials. But this reading is cemented by the Royal Academy's wall text, which describes how the sculptures 'catalogue fictive forms of life existing apart from humanity', and frames the works in terms of the 'primordial soup' hypothesis that life originated from a rich organic solution in the primitive oceans of the Earth. These aspects of the work and its presentation within the exhibition obscure the causal connections between human activity and plastic waste. Likewise, the sculptures fail to illuminate the seriousness of the pollution crisis or directly support our pressing need to innovate effective ways of dealing with it.

Equally unhelpful are the works in the exhibition that prioritise intellectualism over pragmatism. Rimini Protokoll's *win > < win*, for example, is a theatrical installation in which the suffering of humanity and the vast majority of other species from climate breakdown is juxtaposed with the success that jellyfish are enjoying as they thrive in the Earth's warming waters [FIG. 6](#). While it is clear that the climate crisis requires us to think seriously and compassionately about how humans' lives are imbricated with those of non-humans, Protokoll's work stops short of concretely explaining how the proliferation of jellyfish might inspire us to come up with solutions to climate change.

Nevertheless, the exhibition undoubtedly marks a positive development in the Royal Academy's exhibition programme in terms of its political relevance. Earlier this year, the United Nations warned that we have only eleven years to prevent irreversible damage from climate change, and that we must respond to the situation with ambition and urgency. By foregrounding artists committed to developing sustainable ways in which we might exist, the display highlights the important role that art can take in responding to the climate crisis. And yet if the Royal Academy are serious about wanting to support this call to action, they must continue to amplify their focus on sustainability. This would involve not only prioritising environmental concerns within more of their exhibitions, but it would also require immediately effecting a rigorous sustainability strategy throughout its operations. While the institution claims that they are working towards gaining Environmental Management System accreditation (ISO 14001:2015), an internationally recognised certificate for sustainability, they are yet to publish a concrete strategy. The clock is ticking for the art world as a whole to mobilise against the climate crisis, and it must do this with a clear focus on inspiring innovative, considered and effective change.

**Exhibitions details** Eco-Visionaries: Confronting a planet in a state of emergency  
Royal Academy of Arts, London  
23rd November 2019—23rd February 2020

## Footnotes

- 1** M. Lorch: 'New plastic-munching bacteria could fuel a recycling revolution', *The Conversation* (10th March 2016), <https://theconversation.com/new-plastic-munching-bacteria-could-fuel-a-recycling-revolution-55961>, accessed 19th December 2019.

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