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ART

At COP27, Climate Reparations and Existential Artworks

Two weeks of tense negotiations at the UN's annual climate conference created an unprecedented reparations fund for poorer countries ravaged by climate disasters, but illustrated the calamity that awaits if nations don't transition away from fossil fuels.

BY RYAN WADDOUPS

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Last year, the UN's annual climate conference, COP26, in Glasgow, took on a particular urgency as climate scientists issued a dire warning to politicians and diplomats: If nations fail to immediately pivot from fossil fuels, catastrophic consequences would await. Attendees planned to set new targets for cutting emissions from burning coal, oil, and gas, but progress has been meager in a year defined by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The conflict has sparked an energy crisis hampering Europe's ability to invest in renewable energy and resilient infrastructure. Elsewhere, climate disasters continue to intensify: Heavy flooding in Pakistan, severe mudslides in South Africa, and a Category 4 hurricane in the Caribbean were among the 29 weather disasters that caused a billion dollars in damage this year alone.

So the mood was dismal when politicians and diplomats from around the world descended on Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, for COP27 two weeks ago. The tense negotiations, which concluded on Saturday, illustrate the challenges ahead as wealthy countries remain invested in fossil fuels and struggle to see eye-to-eye with developing nations increasingly ravaged by climate disasters. A study published during COP27 found only a few countries followed through on pledges from last year's conference to cut emissions. "Entire countries that are present here will simply disappear from the surface of the planet," Espen Barth Eide, Norway's minister of climate and environment, told the conference on Friday. "Cities we love and live in will be gone. It's such a drama in front of us that we simply have to make sure that we stick to what we were told to do in Glasgow."



"Heaven & Hell in the Anthropocene" (2022) by Bahia Shehab. Photography via Fine Acts

According to Stanford University climate scientist Rob Jackson, the inaction is due to shortsighted political leaders and human apathy. The latter was addressed through an installation near the conference, which sought to showcase the phenomenon for skeptical attendees. According to a 2011 study, attitudes toward climate change differ depending on the temperatures one is currently experiencing—a concept called “visceral fit.” Someone in a sweltering office, for example, is more likely to think global warming is a major threat. It inspired Cairo artist Bahia Shehab to create *Heaven & Hell in the Anthropocene*, an immersive artwork comprising two identical-looking rooms with different temperatures, sounds, sights, and smells meant to represent humanity’s two possible eternal outcomes. In one room, visitors enjoy nature sounds and the aroma of orange blossoms; the other is dark, scorching, and reeks of decomposing fruit.

“We’re trying to address climate anxiety by gamifying and simplifying scientific data, by making it relatable to everyday people and helping them feel like they have the power to make decisions,” Shehab told the *Washington Post*. “I wanted a concept that everybody could understand. I’ve had site workers and doctors and professors and climate activists and professionals and everybody walk through, and they all get it.” Other participating artists were less optimistic, echoing the skepticism and anger expressed by the likes of Ai Weiwei, Romuald Hazoumé, and Olafur Eliasson during last year’s conference.



"Bodies Joined by a Molecule of Air" by Invisible Flock and Jon Bausor. Photography by Fayez Nureldine/AFI via Getty Images

At the WHO's Health Pavilion, a giant sculpture cast felled tree branches in metal and arranges them into an assemblage that resembles a pair of human lungs. Designed by Jon Bausor and Victoria Pratt of the Invisible Flock collective, the artwork draws parallels to fractal growth patterns in both lungs and tree branches. "The price of not taking decisions to fight climate change is paid for by our lungs," Dr. Maria Neira, the WHO's director of public health and environment, told The Guardian. Another artwork features tiny bottles filled with artist Kasia Molga's tears, which were used to sustain algae from the North Sea.

Though the conference and artworks may have skewed somber, the negotiations took a positive turn when diplomats agreed to establish a fund that would help more vulnerable countries cope with climate disasters caused by industrialized nations. The climate reparations deal calls for an international committee to hammer out logistics over the next year. It's an important development given the world is currently slated to warm by up to 2.9 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, and every fraction of a degree means millions will be exposed to coastal flooding, heat waves, and water shortages.