

From Burnout to Belonging:

REIMAGINING CLIMATE ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

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Handmade puppets courtesy of North Barn Theatre in the 2025 People's Parade.
PHOTO: Hamish Gordon

***“Climate action is exhausting.” “I just burn out.”
“It’s too overwhelming to even think about.”***

As I reflected on the topic of community action, my mind was haunted by the voices of my peers, echoing feelings of weariness and concern about the climate movement. The narrative of environmental action being draining is not a foreign one – to myself and many others in the climate movement. I couldn’t help but want to address this, so I began to ask myself why. Why do people avoid doing this work, and why is burnout such a familiar feeling? Why does the climate movement feel so scary?

In discussion with other climate activists and personal reflection on my own identity within the movement, I have noticed just how embedded emotions are into this work. Whether it is a nature-self relationship that results in grief and loss, frustration at the pace at which change is happening or general existentialism about our future, we are guided by our emotions. This work is incredibly human, and these “eco-emotions”¹ are an important part of our identities. As we better understand our human connection to the earth, terms like “eco-anxiety” and “solastalgia” (grief or stress over changes to your home environment – a homesickness for the way the natural environment used to be) hold more weight. I have seen the intensity of these emotions neglected in many climate spaces, and I feel it is important that we tend to them. Some of the strongest initiatives stem from a place of feeling rather than logic, of genuine connection with the Earth and others – these are the advocacy spaces that we need. How do we cultivate a world that makes community action energizing, creative and joyful?

The arts have a unique power to connect, uplift and empower others, and can be a powerful tool for positive community action. They create opportunities to connect with our identity, to process, nurture and express the many emotions around climate change, and to connect with others. The arts can access an authentic, almost primitive self that roots us to what it means to be human – to feel. They ground us to the Earth, ourselves and each other in a way that can be used to foster joyful and energizing community action.

In my own life, the arts have acted as an important avenue for self-discovery, love, and expression. The stage has taught me that my voice – however raw and authentic – is valuable, and one that deserves to be shared. It has empowered me to make change, and is something I fall back on when I feel on the verge of burnout. It makes way for passion and joy with grace, and embraces the messiness of humanity that we need to acknowledge in order to create sustainable action.

My journey of finding the connection between the climate movement and art began with Resonance Youth Choir, a social justice youth choir that I, along with other passionate youth, created in 2023. This We’kwampekik/Truro-based group aims to shed light on social justice issues through music, dance, poetry and visual art. Each project revolves around a theme, which is the cause we base our performance around and raise funds for. In the fall of 2024, the theme was climate change. It was so inspiring to see the way a group of youth could access their emotions around climate change and subsequently share them with the world. It connected audience members to the performers and each other, but also the greater cause of climate justice. What was notable about this performance was that it was grounded in joy and appreciation for the nature that surrounds us. While the performers took opportunities to call for action or voice their frustration, they also accessed a positivity and hope that created a space where people wanted to be. This experience opened my eyes to the arts as a valuable form of activism, and sparked a curiosity about how else this unique relationship is being used.

In recent research, I have found various other initiatives that bring people together through the arts and environment. Each finds a unique way to speak up and take action on heavy and important issues, while being rooted in emotions. I encourage readers to seek out these kinds of groups and projects on their own and engage in conversation about the details of these initiatives.

Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia Projects:

- **Banye Art Foundation: Artivism for Climate Justice: *Empowering Young Artists as Climate Advocates*** – a Kijipuktuk/Halifax-based program educating and empowering young artists to become climate justice activists, supporters and advocates through sustainability, art and storytelling workshops.
- **The Deanery Project** – an arts and environment centre in Ketmenipukwek/Ship Harbour on the Eastern Shore that engage in many community action projects.
- **Creative Climate Showcase** – a grant program led by the Nova Scotia Youth Climate Council for youth artists to create and present a piece inspired by climate change and sustainability.

Beyond:

- **Creating Climate Resilience** - a program in Victoria, B.C. aiming to increase people's emotional resilience through art-based workshops that foster conversation and collaboration.
- **Eco Art Action** - an art collaboration in Manitoba between Youth WITH ART and Manitoba Environmental Youth Network, which introduced high-schoolers to climate issues through art-making.
- **Music Declares Emergency** - an international collective of musicians who take action by speaking up about climate change, and runs the No Music on a Dead Planet Movement (including local members like musician Braden Lam)

Art is a connector – of people, of emotions, of the Earth. It doesn't limit itself to one kind of person, and can be used as a tool to empower others and inspire community action. We must challenge the bounds of what is considered activism, and include conversation, storytelling and the arts as a way to nurture our emotions and create meaningful change. We have the power to transform the narrative of climate change and action to one that is energizing, joyful and authentic. Let us work towards a future that is nurturing, creative and *human*.

REFERENCES

1. Lawinski, Jacques. "Eco-emotions: eco-anxiety, solastalgia, eco-depression..." *Plurality*, July 12, 2023. plurality.eco/en/2023/eco-emotions-eco-anxiety-solastalgia-eco-depression/

Sappho (she/her) is currently studying Community Development and Music at Acadia University. She loves playing piano, climbing trees and spending time with her dog, Hazel.

TAKE ACTION

Look into local climate art initiatives and find ways to get involved with/amplify this form of activism. Find moments in your personal climate journey to reconnect with your humanity through artistic expression!



Creative masks at the 2025 People's Parade.



Community members using felt to create environment-focused art at North Grove.



A group of children creating art during a community event at Glen Garden.