

The Art of Change

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quote by [Ferdinand Foch](#)

If civil rights activist [Rosa Parks's](#) refusal to give up her bus seat for a white passenger, and Martin Luther King's '[I Have A Dream](#)' speech were defining moments of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, what have been the cultural touchstones of the sustainability movement?

Not conferences or treaties, but films, speeches, songs, stories, inciting events – something that lights the fires of passion within a group of people committed to a cause?

Right.

Aside from the Academy Award winning documentary [An Inconvenient Truth](#) finally bringing the issue of climate change into the mainstream over five years ago, it's hard to think of many (if any).

But do we need them? After all, we do have our overwhelming scientific evidence, reams of data and information, on how we are undermining ecosystems and communities with our current modus operandi. A rational response to such information would be to act on it.

Yet it seems the more scientific research, data and information we amass on the ecological and social crises characterised as the sustainability challenge, the less we seem to make any systematic headway on responding to what it is telling us.

Is it because its too complex?

Is it because it does not move us?

Is it because we're appealing to the brain, yet the values in people's hearts may not align with the incoming information?

It's likely to be a combination of all three – people switch off because mentally processing data is extra work in a world overloaded with visual and sonic information and daily work and family demands; it doesn't create a shift because its appealing to the rational part of the brain; and it may often be clashing with other deeply held values.

It's also because we've diminished and devalued the role of the arts.

[Bill McKibben](#), American environmentalist and author, noted:

What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art. We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?

Has the green/sustainability movement lost its way in the left brain, hamstrung itself with science, neutered itself with numbers?

In his essay, [The Quants and The Poets](#), [Dark Mountain's](#) Paul Kingsnorth took aim at the over-reliance on numbers and the near-absence of narrative, stories and attention paid to worldviews:

...the green movement has torpedoed itself with numbers. Its single-minded obsession with climate change, and its insistence on seeing this as an engineering challenge which must be overcome with technological solutions guided by the neutral gaze of Science, has forced it into a ghetto from which it may never escape.

Most greens in the mainstream now spend their time arguing about whether they prefer windfarms to wave machines or nuclear power to carbon sequestration. They offer up remarkably confident predictions of what will happen if we do or don't do this or that, all based on mind-numbing numbers cherry-picked from this or that 'study' as if the world were a giant spreadsheet which only needs to be balanced correctly...

We live in a remarkably literal-minded and reductionistic culture. I'm struck listening to or reading the news, for example, by how nothing is seen to be 'real' unless it is sanctioned by the priesthoods of either Science or Business, and preferably both...which produces an environmental movement made up of frustrated, passionate people who feel obliged to act like speak-your-weight machines just to be heard. If we want to move beyond the futility and despair imposed by the cold narrowness of this worldview, where do we look? What is missing here is stories, and an understanding of the importance of stories in getting to the bottom of what is really going on. Because at root, this whole squabble between worldviews is not about numbers at all – it is about narratives...

These days, the green movement is being taken over by quants. It's easy to see why. Quants present easy, numbered, labelled arguments which may sometimes require a maths degree but don't require a rewiring of your worldview or an examination of your narrative. A green quant might be telling you to change your lightbulbs or come out on the streets in favour of a nuclear power plant or a windfarm, but he's not asking you to examine your values or your society's underlying mythology. And if you talk to him about this, it is very easy indeed for him to laugh and tell you loftily that this is all very nice but is hardly comparable to the serious business of saving the world one emission at a time.

It's not that we don't need our scientists, our 'quants', of course we do – but this is only one method of knowing, of being. It is also that the arts and sciences are considered 'separate' that is part of the problem – because there are many inspiring and beautiful aspects of [science and mathematics](#), just as there is logic and reason to the arts, such as architecture, Aristotle's [three-act structure](#) of plays and novels.

The issue currently is that public discourse on sustainability, and just about everything else, is now overwhelmingly about numbers and reason. Everything has to have a cost-benefit analysis to be justified. We seem to have lost the capacity to make decisions based on values that are anything other than numbers, particularly dollars.

And if change comes more from the heart than the mind, if we are more receptive to stories than information, to visual communication rather than words and data, what is the role of art, in its broadest sense?

Artist Jay Griffiths put it eloquently in this extract from her essay *The Far-Seers of Art*, [*Climate Change Needs Persuasive Art, Not Propaganda*](#):

The issue of climate change needs persuasion rather than propaganda and art understands the psychology of persuasion. It is hard to allow oneself to be drawn by overt dogma, which is delivered in the daylight areas of the mind.

Art works in the shuttered twilights where darkness bestows a tenderness and protection, a secret place where the psyche feels safe enough to alter. It is always easier to change one's mind in the dark.

I am far from an expert, an historian, or a sociologist of the arts, but a keen observer of stories and cultural phenomena. Of course art has many manifestations (including one of my favourites, political cartoons, which I have omitted in this post, but may cover separately along with film in a later one) – here are some examples of various forms which have influenced social change, and had an emotional impact on me.

Photography

The power of the still image to capture attention and invite its audience into the story it represents is enormous, particularly if it is unique, compelling, or provocative.

'[The Blue Marble](#)', the first clear image of planet earth from space in 1972, became a defining image of the emerging environmental movement in the 1970s:

...the image was seen by many as a depiction of Earth's frailty, vulnerability, and isolation amid the vast expanse of space. NASA archivist Mike Gentry has speculated that The Blue Marble is the most widely distributed image in human history.

The iconic [Pulitzer Prize winning image](#) of nine year old Phan Thị Kim Phúc, taken as she fled naked, screaming and burning down a road in the aftermath of a napalm attack, changed the way the world viewed the Vietnam War – writing in 2000, the International Herald Tribune's [Tom Buerkle](#) said:

For anyone old enough to remember the Vietnam War the photograph of the naked 9- year-old girl running toward a camera screaming in agony as napalm burned her flesh is seared into the consciousness. Her image has become a symbol of war that transcends debate about the rights or wrongs of U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

Photographer and artist [Chris Jordan](#)'s work in capturing and communicating 'mass scale' of the impact of human activity is outstanding. Here at [TED](#), Jordan talks about his work, including discussion of unconscious behaviours, denial and collective impacts:

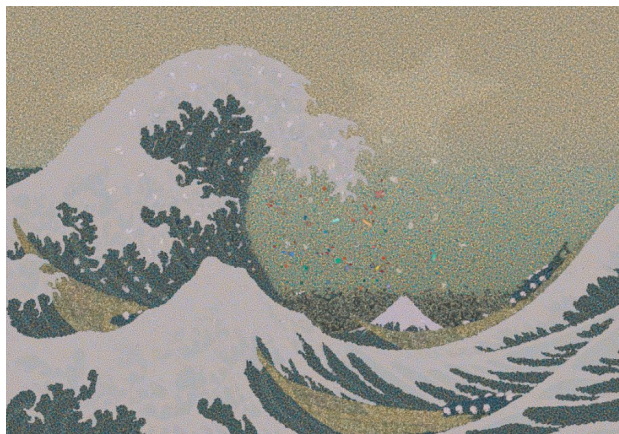
...as we try to educate ourselves about the enormity of our culture, the information that we have to work with is these gigantic numbers: numbers in the millions, in the hundreds of millions, in the billions and now in the trillions...We can't make meaning out of these enormous statistics. And so that's what I'm trying to do with my work, is to take these numbers, these statistics from the raw language of data, and to translate them into a more universal visual language that can be felt. Because my belief is, if we can feel these issues, if we can feel these things more deeply, then they'll matter to us more than they do now. And if we can find that, then we'll be able to find, within each one of us, what it is that we need to find to face the big question, which is: how do we change?

Jordan's series [Running the Numbers](#), [Intolerable Beauty](#) and [Midway](#) capture enormous numbers in visual form, and the impacts of our activities that are invisible because they are 'out there', as a work of art.

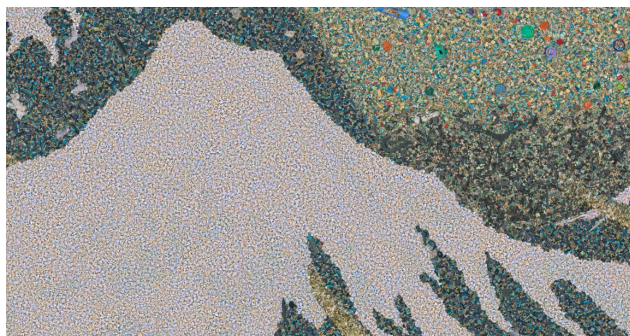
Make sure you zoom in, scroll down, read the captions. Here's a sample of Chris's work:

Gyre, 2009 8x11 feet, in three vertical panels

Depicts 2.4 million pieces of plastic, equal to the estimated number of pounds of plastic pollution that enter the world's oceans every hour. All of the plastic in this image was collected from the Pacific Ocean.



Partial zoom:



Close up:



Sculpture



[Jason deCaires Taylor's *Underwater Sculpture*](#) is both arresting and stunning in its unexpectedness, and is a surreal insight into what a world reclaimed by water could do to all our human artefacts. Ironically, this image is from a series titled *Inertia*.

There are a series of these sculptures in various locations around the world, including off the coast of Mexico and Greece.

Poetry

To understand the emotional power of poetry – is there an Australian who is not affected by the strains of [Waltzing Matilda](#), or the lines of Dorothea Mackellar's [My Country](#)? Every culture and nation has its defining poems and songs.

I visited the redwood forests north of San Francisco in 2001 – a memento of my visit was a postcard, with the following poem, [The Redwoods](#), by Joseph Strauss, Chief Engineer of the Golden Gate Bridge:

*Here, sown by the Creator's hand.
In serried ranks, the Redwoods stand:
No other clime is honored so,
No other lands their glory know.*

*The greatest of Earth's living forms,
Tall conquerors that laugh at storms;
Their challenge still unanswered rings, Through fifty centuries of kings.*

*The nations that with them were young,
Rich empires, with their forts far-flung,
Lie buried now-their splendor gone:
But these proud monarchs still live on.*

*So shall they live, when ends our days,
When our crude citadels decay;
For brief the years allotted man,
But infinite perennials' span.*

*This is their temple, vaulted high,
And here, we pause with reverent eye,
With silent tongue and awestruck soul;
For here we sense life's proper goal:*

*To be like these, straight, true and fine,
to make our world like theirs, a shrine;
Sink down, Oh, traveler, on your knees,
God stands before you in these trees.*

I have not yet been to the old growth forests in Tasmania in my own country. But after having been to their equivalent in the States and encountering this poem, when I returned home, I signed up as a member of the Wilderness Society, the largest environmental conservation organisation in Australia. Because I was already involved in various initiatives, it wasn't as a front-line activist – but it was something.

Every time I read that poem, I am back among the redwoods, getting vertigo on the ground, craning to see where the tops of the trees are.

Music

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over.

[Joe Hill](#), labor organiser and songwriter

Just as with poetry, every cultural group has songs which are meaningful and cherished, which endure. Key among these are folk songs, [protest songs](#), songs that tell the stories of people and their lives, their joys, triumphs, struggles and tragedies. In 2010, the New Statesman published a list of [Top 20 Political Songs](#) that spanned decades of the 20th century, but which focuses heavily on North American and British artists.

A six part PBS series [Get Up, Stand Up](#) traced the history of pop and politics, including the [Live Aid](#) concerts of 1985 which were watched by around two billion people in 150 nations around the globe, at the time, 40% of the planet's population. [Widely criticised](#) for failing to solve the ongoing humanitarian crises in Africa (an objective that was never set for, nor possible to achieve as a result of the events), the concerts did act as a massive 'signal interruption' and put the issue of Africa on the political agenda. Live Aid co-organiser Bob Geldof:

The point about Live Aid was of course the money, the 30 million. But it galvanised way beyond that. I hadn't fully anticipated the number of people watching. The number of people watching became a political lobby. Thatcher agreed to put poverty on the G7 agenda, accepting the argument that poverty is a destabilising influence on the global economy.

John Lennon's classic song [Imagine](#) has been included in a wide range of most-influential and greatest-songs-of-all-time lists. Covered by more than 100 artists, this song was listed third in Rolling Stone Magazine's [500 Greatest Songs of All Time](#):

...22 lines of graceful, plain-spoken faith in the power of a world, united in purpose, to repair and change itself.

(John's wife) Ono said Imagine was 'just what John believed: that we are all one country, one world, one people. He wanted to get that idea out.'

Lennon's lyrics had a huge impact on the worldview of people everywhere, including offering a way to think about the world in terms other than the nation-state, and expanding people's consciousness about who 'we' are.

Novels

Jostein Gaarder's novel [Sophie's World](#) takes the lead character on a journey of discovery through the history of western philosophy, wrapped up in a mystery story.

British author Ben Elton's satirical novels [Stark](#), [Gridlock](#) and [This Other Eden](#) encapsulate social and environmental issues in story (warning – links contain plot spoilers). I will always remember the impact of the very last page and line of Stark (which is only achieved if the rest of the book has been read!) – if it is an author's goal to leave the reader contemplating their book for a long time, Elton succeeded.

Street Art

[Street art](#), incorporating graffiti, [culture jamming](#), subvertising and billboard liberation, is as much art as any other form. [Banksy](#) is arguably one of the most famous [street artists](#), and has attracted a cult following for his work, having self-published a number of books of his work, and also had several books written about his work.

The latest incarnation of street art is '[Brandalism](#)' in the UK:

Twenty-six artists, including Montgomery, have now completed the world's first international collaborative "subvertising" campaign, hijacking 35 billboards across Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and London. They seek "to challenge the destructive impacts of the advertising industry" as well as to tackle its detrimental impact on issues such as body image, consumerism and debt.

Social Media

It's not only authors, filmmakers, poets and playwrights and elusive street artists who can make a splash with their work – with the rise of social media, anyone can become a content creator, with potential reach of messages limited only by the creativity and ingenuity of the individual in producing something 'shareable' that will be transmitted widely, over and over.

Those with little to no graphic design skill now also have a range of online tools with which they can generate simple images that have the potential to become memes.

Another approach is to undertake something unique or audacious and document it online – people love to live vicariously through others who dare to do things they themselves do not, like give up their jobs and travel the world. Mark Boyle became '[The Moneyless Man](#)' by making a decision, living it and writing about it. Now everyone wants to know the story – why is he doing it? How is he doing it?

Social media pioneer and film exec [Chris Adams](#) (whose qualifications include a PhD in poetry) helped create [Participant Media](#) – the film company established by e-Bay founder Jeff Skoll.

Adams characterises Participant as making \$300 million dollar commercials for social issues designed to inspire people to become advocates for social change.

Adams points out that social media is simply the latest incarnation of a storytelling medium – that we used to tell our stories in small groups around the campfire. The internet and social media has expanded our ability to connect with others beyond our physical location, and increased the size of our 'campfire'.

Billions of people are telling each other stories online right now. That, rather than fanning the flames of polarised debate, is the way to 'set the human soul on fire'.

While it's true we can't all be an astronaut, a war photographer, or an internationally famous musician; while we might not have the clout of a Chris Adams or a Bob Geldof, or have the leeway in our professional lives to do something outrageous, we can all find our own ways that let us 'interrupt' the status quo, and convey meaning in ways that touch people emotionally, through story, through the arts, through creative expression.