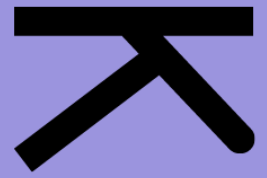


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CLIMATE AGENCY OF ARTIST UNIONS



S

Introduction

How can artist unions structurally and systemically engage with and address the climate crisis?

There is a growing concern among artists, as in society as a whole, about the climate crisis, closely followed by an urgency for collective action that engages with and addresses it. As a response to the increasing attention brought to this issue by members, UKS implemented climate action into its annual Action Plans for 2020 and 2021, and further as an 'area of focus' (fokusområde 4.2.) in its Strategy Plan for 2022 – 2026.¹ UKS acknowledges that artist unions have a part to play in addressing the climate crisis, the question is how and in what way?

As a first step, the UKS board initiated a *climate action working group* consisting of three board members that report back to the board with research and advice within the Strategy Plan 2022 – 2026. The group presented preliminary research in 2022 and went on to develop a series of 3 online workshops that were carried out in 2023,² with the aim to collectively explore systemic and structural ways artist unions can engage with the climate crisis. Knowledge production is a crucial part of union work, and the workshops sought to create a space to share relevant knowledge and develop collective strategies.

This document is a result of these workshops and synthesises what was learned, discussed, and questioned. It is meant as a tool for artist unions to identify structural and systemic ways of addressing the climate crisis and describes 3 concrete approaches unions can adopt in that work. It is a starting point meant to encourage artist unions to create their own action plans that are specific to their contexts, corresponding to their capacities. In fact, the first workshop exercise was to map out the capacities artist unions *already have* as well as which they need in order to do more.

Every artist union is already in a unique position to act: this document aims to offer something across a range of positions. We do, however, want to emphasise that when reading through, please scale it to your reality in terms of resources, levels and areas of influence, member base, visibility, exhibiting and programming activity, etc. We have also included a description of the exercises done in the workshop under the chapter '[Steps forward](#)', should you wish to carry out similar workshops within your organisation. Please take this as an invitation.

¹ These documents govern UKS' field of action and priorities and are voted into effect by the UKS general assembly each year.

² The workshops took place on the 2nd, 16th and 23rd of November. The workshops series was supported by the NBK fagpolitisk midler, NBK fagpolitiske midler.

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Synthesis and conclusions from the workshops

The objective of the workshop series is to propose structural and systemic *approaches* to climate action that artist unions can adopt and adapt to their specific contexts, keeping in mind their capacities.

To address such a complex challenge, it is essential to map and discuss what capacities artists unions already have and what they need³. These capacities (the ones we identified are listed at the bottom of the document) give due value to the fundamental qualities essential for organising: recognising the historical and contemporary position of artist organisations in the cultural field, as well as incorporating artistic competence and potential.

What is an approach?

An approach can be understood as a *strategy* that guides the development of specific actions. It can be described as a proposal or attitude that is general enough to be adaptable to contexts, while also providing guidance to frame objectives, suggestions of possible areas of action and how these interact. For example, unions can make use of an approach as a starting point from which to make actionable plans; it can also help prioritise points within those plans.

The DDD categories: Dutiful, Disruptive, Dangerous

During the workshop, we discussed the characterisation and categorisation of approaches as: *dutiful, disruptive or dangerous*.⁴

Dutiful: *The importance and power of exploiting windows of opportunity within current structures and systems.*

Disruptive: *Being more interested in critiquing, challenging, and changing the system than working dutifully within it.*

Dangerous: *Does not have to be strategic, but it often involves a clear vision of new and desired futures.*

This categorisation can guide you to identify which field(s) your organisation currently functions in and from which position(s) you would like to act in the future. It also helps reflect on the specific actions you are thinking through, and whether they align with your organisation's intended position and objectives.

³ For further reading on creative skills and capacity needs in the green transition, please see the research project, [CYANOTYPES](#), and the network [Creative Pact for Skills](#).

⁴ Referencing: O'Brien, K., E. Selboe, and B. M. Hayward. 2018. Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent. *Ecology and Society* 23(3):42. This classification was adapted by Julie's Bicycle in a workshop on climate justice at the Creative Climate Justice Seminar hosted by Rosendal Theatre with Klimakultur and Julie's Bicycle on 29th September 2023. <https://rosendaltheater.no/en/program/creative-climate-justice-seminar>

These three characteristics can be mutually reinforcing and the approaches we discussed in the third workshop contain traits of all three. We have reflected on these discussions and further synthesised the proposed approaches into the following:

1. Integrating climate action in core union work
2. Building and sustaining networks
3. Climate utopia

The three approaches

1. Integrating climate action in core union work

- How does the union effectively mobilise its *core functions* for climate action?
- How can we *sustain* our drive to engage with and address the climate crisis and *maintain* our focus on this cause?

The internal union structure

In the past couple of years we have seen how artist unions have reflected and acted upon their members' growing concerns about the climate crisis. Some unions, including UKS, have signed petitions and statements on fossil-fuel non-proliferation; participated in public talks and in the media. Knowledge sharing and awareness raising are core functions of the union. The climate crisis will affect all of our labour conditions and as unions we stand with environmental activists and other concerned organisations for a climate just future.

Artist unions can prioritise financial spending, for example from NBK's fagpolitiske midler, for workshops or other forms of research and awareness raising, to strategise and plan how unions can adapt to climate change and/or contribute to societal change. This is a generative first step that can be sustained through adding clauses and articulating a commitment to the climate by including it in their principles and strategy plans. Over time, points can be added to the action plan that addresses climate concerns internally; such as encouraging a sustainable work culture, or externally; towards our member-base and other cultural institutions.

Climate justice as part of working conditions

A traditional approach to labour rights is to make working- and living conditions visible, like pay, contracts, access to benefits, etc., and to build awareness about expectations and insufficient practices. Another is to demand collective negotiation rights of industry standards and legislation. It can be effective to implement climate awareness into union practices, for example in the description of best-practice contracts for artists, or in collective agreements locally or nationally. Extending this approach, artist unions can make information available to their members about exhibition venues, ethical banks and institutions that follow best practices with regards to climate justice and labour rights. Unions can also integrate perspectives from climate justice into already existing statements and demands, like about studios, production facilities (fellesverksteder) and exhibition spaces.

Learning from union histories

Each artist union has deployed strategies, knowledge and experience over time in different social and political contexts. *What has your union done already in the past that you can learn from or build upon when it comes to climate action?* An inspirational example is the national survey Kunstnerkår (Norwegian Artists economic and social situation, 1970), by Aina Helgesen that was turned into an [exhibition at UKS in 1971](#), which is said to have motivated (and provided essential data for) a wave of political organising and lobbying for the improvement of artists working conditions in the years that followed. Can these practices and strategies from the past be adapted for climate action today?

External interfaces (members, institutions, society at large):

New political and economic frontiers

Protecting artistic labour is artist unions' primary concern. It is important to map and identify how the climate crisis and allied policies from the government, like the green transition, will impact these labour conditions. This will also create a sense of ownership for the artist unions of the economic changes and policy implementations looming on the horizon for the cultural sector. For example, climate reporting and administrative work will play a bigger role, but can we negotiate a seat at the table to co-create the criteria that this will be based on⁵?

One way to acknowledge the broader impact of climate change on artistic labour would be to recognise and protect all the "artistic-related work"⁶ as well. After all, the patchwork economy is the way we work. Perhaps through promoting artist-related work – political work, managing research projects, consulting with institutions – new work opportunities

⁵ Re-framing the criteria and indicators of climate impact from the perspective of the cultural and creative sectors is being researched and developed by Mari Sanden and Florian Schneider at Trondheim Academy of Fine Art, NTNU through the Horizon Europe funded research project [PACESETTERS](#).

⁶ Term used in [Kunstnerundersøkelsen 2019](#), Telemarksforskning (commissioned by Kulturdirektoratet)

and potential new roles for artists might open up. Can such opportunities help artists integrate their climate concerns into broader fields of work? There is perhaps a potential to negotiate along these lines with governments on local and regional levels. Moreover, artists who might fall out of traditional exhibiting practices, might feel more supported by this approach.

Sustainability in work culture in the arts

Sustainability needs to be thought of as intertwining material and social concerns. The art world puts pressure on artists to constantly produce *new* work with artist incomes remaining more or less the same. While artist unions fight for fair pay for artistic work, are there other kinds of practices in the art world that might constitute a more sustainable approach? For example, what would an emphasis on circularity of material and artworks mean for exhibition making? Furthermore, information can be shared about certain materials and their toxicity in the form of a glossary with their climate impact stated. For example, some acrylic paints contain nanoplastic waste or some binder glue releases formaldehyde. It falls within the union's mandate to prioritise a sustainable work culture, both internally and externally, emphasising both material and social dimensions of artistic work.

2. Building and sustaining networks

Why networks

The knowledge and competence needed to address the climate crisis in the visual arts could be shared across the various cultural and creative fields, or even beyond the sector. Moreover, the forthcoming climate policies for the cultural and creative sector will largely be applied to the sector as a whole and not only the visual arts. To collectivise the effort, artist unions can strengthen their existing networks, diversify and find new objectives for them, as well as build new ones.

The objective for network building, maintaining, and strengthening is to share knowledge, strategies, competence, and resources; to act in concert as a channel of influence to advocate for changes and to maintain accountability. This approach builds on and expands on the artist unions' existing capacities to organise networks, their connections with grassroots activism, their ability to speak a versatile language that builds trust with members, cultural institutions and policy makers alike.

Mobilise within existing networks

Artist unions can mobilise their existing networks of influence and channels of trust built with local municipalities, Kulturdirektoratet, Kulturdepartementet and cultural institutions. For example, unions can make use of alliances with employer organisations, such as Virke, to lobby for regulations or political alliances and climate concerns can be put on the agenda in existing networks like *Kunstnernettverket*. If climate-related decisions and action points are agreed upon in these forums, they increase in impact and influence.

Climate concerns need to be addressed in a decentralised way, meaning that artist organisations could engage with climate issues based on the region and context they are in. For example, imagine how collaboration with local municipalities or with local community groups can strengthen climate justice cooperation based on local experiences and situated knowledge.

Building networks: finding allies

Artist unions can [build new networks](#) specifically focused on climate concerns. For example, UKS has had two informal dinners and hosted a gathering after the climate march on the 20th of Nov 2023 with union representatives from many cultural fields and beyond. These informal dinners give us the opportunity to share information about cultural and climate policy work, share approaches and strategies and plan future actions. They also help connect an otherwise fragmented cultural and creative sector. Working with the curator's association, for example, could help connect people across different institutional roles and responsibilities in the arts, towards more coordinated goals. Artist unions can also turn to environmental organisations to gain knowledge, share tactics, and build alliances for action.

There is a [growing climate action movement](#) in the cultural and creative sector globally. Building networks of solidarity with them might also provide opportunities to exchange strategies and methods. [Occupy Climate Justice](#) is an example that maps and documents grassroots initiatives that tackle the climate crisis.

Lastly, artistic production is intertwined with multiple sectors based on the materials and media being used. This puts artist unions in a position to build strategic alliances with labour organisations across the value chain, like paper, shipping, manufacturing, etc

Accountability

Accountability goes hand-in-hand with building and strengthening networks. As museums and exhibition venues begin the process of inscribing their climate pledge into strategy plans and action programmes (f.ex. The Green Producers Club), artist unions can play the role of holding them accountable to these promises. Furthermore, it might be important that the criteria for accountability are co-created by those in the network. For example, many institutions insist on carbon calculators as the first step towards climate action. While it is

vital to acknowledge that museums, art festivals and biennales have a responsibility to reduce their large carbon footprints, it is important to emphasise other criteria of accountability that focus on climate justice.⁷ In 2022, Julie's Bicycle published a [guide to climate justice](#) that introduces the complexity of climate change through examples and case studies.

A way of approaching such accountability networks could be to form an alliance of institutions or organisations that mutually acknowledge their work towards climate justice, and pledge to help each other do their best in that work. This could include knowledge and resource sharing, awareness raising, mutually agreed upon criteria for accountability, and consultation and mutual support in proposing and responding to climate-cultural policy.

3. Climate utopia

The ability and practice of artists to imagine and create alternative systems to the current, in critical and ethical ways, is an asset towards realising sustainable worlds. With questions of care, justice and alternative ways of organising society already a driving force for artists, we nurture many seeds of contribution to a climate just society or even a climate utopia. How can artist unions make way to mobilise these capacities? How can they make room in the workings of the union to think in radical and imaginative terms? For example, can artist unions align with alternative economic theories, and work towards circular economy and degrowth? How can artist unions destabilise economic disparity within the field? Can they contribute to an understanding of different indicators of wellbeing, both through their own workings but also in re-structuring artistic production? If artists are one of the first gig economies⁸, can we transpose our understanding of wellbeing to other gig workers?

Artist unions can be sites of education; our political work a site for radicality; our exhibiting spaces, newsletters, social gatherings, networks, a platform to publicly express our imagination.

⁷ "The effects of climate change are unevenly distributed on local, national and global levels, so it's not enough to focus on the environmental and physical science of climate change for solutions – we also need to examine the interconnectedness of economic, political and ethical issues surrounding the causes and impacts of climate change and act accordingly." <https://juliesbicycle.com/our-work/climate-justice/>

⁸ A free market system in which temporary positions are common and organisations hire independent workers for short-term commitments.

Steps forward

Continuing the work

The approaches above can be adopted and adapted by artist unions and defined further through action plans that are relevant to their capacity, organisational structure, regional context and resources. Further actions taken should ideally become a common pool of knowledge, shared amongst all artist unions under the NBK umbrella.

Working on climate concerns is an ongoing effort, with this workshop series as one of the first steps for UKS. To take this work forward, we suggest a decentralised approach – to establish lines of communication among all board members in the different artist unions interested in thinking about climate concerns. To involve our member base as well, like their participation in these workshops. Perhaps, local organisations could take turns to host knowledge sharing and capacity building activities to keep this work alive.

If you wish to start, concretize or intensify your artist union's work with regards to climate action, holding a series of workshops like the ones we did might be useful. Therefore, we have included a description of our workshop structure in this document, outlining the exercises we did and a list of capacities (haves and needs) that might help start the discussion.

Workshop exercises

The workshops were all concentrated around the same structure: first, the group received input from an invited speaker, after which the participants were split into several smaller groups to collectively engage in discussing and mapping out their responses, ideas and thoughts. For the mapping process we used the digital program [Miro](#) (a visual and digital platform that allows for a collective writing and visualisation online). The workshops were 3 hours long, the duration of individual exercise can be adjusted based on time available.

- Workshop 1:
 - Input session with an invited speaker.
 - The invited speaker brings 1 question to the workshop, which the participants discuss in smaller groups. End with an in-plenum session, where the various answers can be presented and discussed together.
 - Map out artist unions capacities: which ones do you have, and which ones do you need to engage with the climate crisis? (In smaller groups) See also the list of capacities included further down, which can help if you feel stuck in this process.

- Workshop 2:
 - Input session with an invited speaker.
 - The invited speaker brings 1 question to the workshop, which the participants discuss in smaller groups. End with an in-plenum session, where the various answers can be presented and discussed together.
 - Map out possible approaches for artist unions to engage with and address the climate crisis (in smaller groups).
 - Categorise these approaches into the DDD categories: Dutiful, Disruptive and Dangerous.⁹

- Workshop 3:
 - Work on consolidating the gained knowledge and shared experiences from the previous workshops into three concrete approaches that your artist union can take to engage with and address the climate crisis. Do this first in smaller groups, before ending with an in-plenum session where the various approaches are presented and discussed together.

⁹ Referencing: O'Brien, K., E. Selboe, and B. M. Hayward. 2018. Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent. *Ecology and Society* 23(3):42. Via a workshop with Julie's Bicycle at Rosendal Theatre.

List of mapped capacities

Capacities are skills, instincts, knowledge, experience, resources, abilities.

Capacities we have:

1. Ability to think critically and challenge normative narratives
2. Ability to raise concerns fearlessly and host and facilitate discussions in the public
3. Members are closely connected to grassroots organisations and activists
4. Trustworthy and established channels for influence, cooperation and dialogue with politicians, press, municipalities and cultural institutions
5. Familiarity with trade union structures in a society where unions are powerful
6. A high level of climate consciousness, knowledge and curiosity in the member-base
7. Possibility to encourage climate awareness and consciousness through art
8. Comfort with transdisciplinary approaches
9. Power to influence and encourage more sustainable artistic production with regards to materials, transport and storage
10. Ability to envision climate responses beyond technocratic solutions. Unafraid to embrace complexities of climate justice.
11. Ear-marked funding for political activity (fagpolitiske midler)
12. Ability to redistribute funding towards more decentralised and grassroots-driven engagement with climate concerns
13. Power to be affected and produce affect
14. Many unions have their own exhibition spaces (public space)
15. Ability to work effectively and find solutions with small budgets and through building cooperative models

Capacities we need:

1. Consistent engagement, knowledge sharing and capacity building through focus groups, seminars or special interest groups.
2. Capacity to organise and listen to perspectives on climate justice from across the globe and from different disciplines and professional fields
3. Human resources and ear-marked funding for climate related activities
4. Build alliances and mobilise relations with activist groups and to learn from them
5. Build capacity to influence local politics. District organisations can take the lead.
6. Conviction and commitment from unions to formally work on the climate challenge
7. Access to specialist knowledge on climate, sustainability, economics
8. Ability to concretise aims and actions towards climate justice
9. Clear direction towards waste management in studios and exhibiting spaces
10. Ability to imagine and encourage new ways of making art that are in line with circular economies (where the value of the work from process to product to aftermath can change and grow)

11. Ability to initiate and incentivise artistic involvement in areas that artists are not usually involved (ex. climate conferences)
12. Ability to reach out to and exchange knowledge and solidarity with other unions in the value chain of artistic production
13. Recognise that because artists are more climate aware and might have lower carbon footprints, we might be in a better position to influence the green shift
14. Confidence to work on larger socio-economic pathways like basic income
15. Inventing creative ways of including/integrating the climate question in the other concerns unions lobby for. Just to show the connectivity of all things art labour with climate questions

Resources

- *Climate Justice Code: For artists, art workers, and arts organisations situated in the Global North* / [link to pdf](#)
- *Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent* (2018) - Karen O'Brien, Elin Selboe, Bronwyn M. Hayward / [link to pdf](#)
- *Julie's Bicycle: a leading not-for-profit, mobilising the arts and culture to take action on the climate, nature and justice crisis* / [link to website](#)
- *Kunstnerundersøkelsen 2019* (2023), Kulturdirektoratet / [link to pdf](#)

- UKS Action Plan for 2023 / [link to pdf](#)
- UKS Action Plans from previous years / [link to website](#)
- UKS Strategy Plan 2022-2026 / [link to pdf](#)
- Horizon Europe-funded research and innovation project, [PACESETTERS](#)
- Pan-European research project, co-funded by European Union and ERASMUS+, [CYANOTYPES](#)

Recommendations by Julie Forchhammer:

- *A bigger picture - my fight to bring a new African voice to the climate crisis* (2021) - Vanessa Nakate
- *Climate change is racist - race, privilege and the struggle for climate justice* (2021) - Jeremy Williams
- *It's not just you - how to navigate eco-anxiety and the climate crisis* (2023) - Tori Tsui

Recommendations by Margrethe Kolstad Brekke:

- *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (2017) - Kate Raworth
- *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (2020) - Jason Hickel / [link to pdf](#)
- *Project Drawdown* - "Project Drawdown is the world's leading resource for climate solutions." (2014-now) / [link to website](#)
- *Utopia for Realists: The Case for a Universal Basic Income, Open Borders, and a 15-hour Workweek* (2014) - Rutger Bregman
- *You Matter More Than You Think: Quantum Social Change for a Thriving World* (2021) - Karen O'Brien

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