

Climate Crisis + Media Arts

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CLIMATE CHANGE IS A PRESENT EMERGENCY, NOT A FUTURE THREAT

The world is closer than ever to exceeding the 1.5-degree Celsius limit to global warming set in the [Paris Agreement](#) less than a decade ago. Climate change no longer merely looms in our future—its impacts are [already evident](#) across the world and [mounting faster](#) than scientists predicted. Rising global temperatures [are causing](#) more frequent and intense heatwaves, wildfires and other extreme weather events, leading to devastating consequences for communities and ecosystems alike. Sea levels are [steadily rising](#), [endangering](#) coastal populations and threatening to inundate low-lying regions, displacing millions and disrupting industry and international supply chains. Additionally, the acceleration of glacial melt and the thawing of permafrost are releasing large amounts of greenhouse gases, further exacerbating the warming feedback loop and complicating efforts to curb the trajectory of climate change.

Media will play a [critical role](#) in shifting public perceptions of climate change from an impending threat to a present emergency: art [illicits powerful emotional responses](#) and can even [inspire altruistic behavior](#) among audiences. Today's media depictions of the climate crisis primarily illustrate possible environmental futures as opposed to depicting how people and animals are living and dying within a changing climate right now. Yet [research has demonstrated](#) that the general public is more likely to believe in climate change if they see its effects

unfolding in the present day, no matter whether they are concerned about the phenomenon or doubtful of its threats, and environmental films [could even increase environmental concern](#) in climate change skeptics.

A NEW TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATION IS UNEARTHING STORIES OF CURRENT CLIMATE CRISES

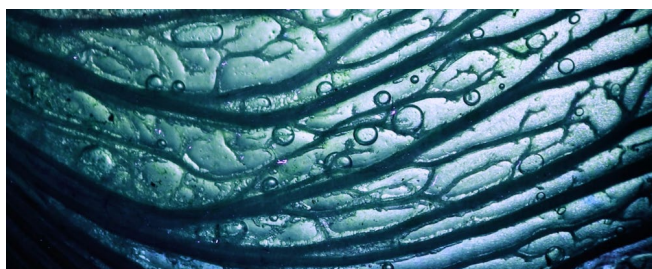
A unique collaboration among filmmakers, scholars and curators shows promise for illuminating stories and raising consciousness of the present climate emergency across the world. The [Climate Crisis + Media Arts Global Working Group](#), housed at [Northwestern University's Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs](#), includes filmmakers in the U.S., Canada and China as well as scholars of documentary media, anthropology, communication studies, art history, English and more.

Together, the group aims to influence cultural and political discourse on the climate emergency by creating new ways of depicting what it means to live and die within a changing climate in the present moment. They launched an open call for applications from artists and scholars across the world seeking [support to produce film and media art](#) to illuminate the everyday experiences of people living on the front lines of the climate emergency—what climate change actually looks and feels like, and how it intersects with other pressing global issues such as migration and economic inequality. The group received nearly 200 applications from Africa,

Asia, Europe, North America, Latin America and islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The [10 filmmakers, artists and students selected to receive the group's support](#) are united by their aim to produce public-facing and sensorial depictions of the material effects of climate change in a range of sites, including in the U.S., China, France, Jamaica, Madagascar and Taiwan.

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One of the projects supported by the group is a collaborative, feature-length documentary bringing together a team of artists and scientists following the [Ekipa Fanihy bat research team](#) and local bat catchers in Madagascar. Directed by Erik Nuding and Kendall Fitzgerald, *With Their Backs to the Sky* will explore the threats of habitat degradation, disease spillover and conflict between humans and bats in the island country. Another documentary, *A Very Bad Wizard* directed by Courtney Stephens, will trace the history of weather prediction, illuminating the ways in which agricultural communities depend on weather knowledge that is all but disintegrating in the face of increasingly erratic weather patterns.



*Still image from a forthcoming film supported by the Climate Crisis + Media Arts group, *Heaven in a Wildflower*, directed by Jesseca Ynez Simmons*

The Climate Crisis + Media Arts Global Working Group will provide these artists with platforms for public engagement through screenings, discussions, forums, artist and scholar visits. The group plans to host supported works online.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

Efforts to generate artistic representations of climate change are gaining much-needed traction in mainstream media. A [first-of-its-kind study](#) from the University of Southern California Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project and nonprofit story consultancy Good Energy found that less than 3% of more than 37,000 film and television scripts that were written and aired in the U.S. between 2016 and 2020 contained keywords related to climate change, and only one in 10 scripts depicting extreme weather events such as wildfires and hurricanes connected them to our changing climate.

The Climate Ambassadors Network (CAN) has also rallied film and television industry professionals committed to changing the culture in Hollywood around the mission to address the climate crisis in everyday decision-making, from incorporating climate realities into characters' backstories to expanding Hollywood's understanding of a climate story. Research has shown that the television industry can play a major role in [influencing shifts in public attitude](#), and environmental films tend to [increase concern for climate change](#) even in skeptics, demonstrating the promise of CAN's efforts.

Similarly, the Climate Crisis + Media Arts Global Working Group seeks funding to create a sustainable Climate Crisis + Media Arts Laboratory based at Northwestern University dedicated to training and supporting students and faculty to engage the present climate crisis through innovative media designed to foster empathy and positive change.