

ACT with the Arts Festival Evaluation

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Lewis Baker, Annie Mitchell, Amanda Cole, Kate Benham

Executive Summary

In this evaluation report we share the responses of attendees and artists engaged in an innovative festival of the arts for climate in a South Devon town and surrounding area. Around 1200 people attended 23 arts events across 12 venues over eight days in the early summer of 2024. The responses of those who engaged with the evaluation across a range of events indicated that the festival aims were well met: first to inspire people to engage with the climate and ecological crisis through the arts, and second to help people to connect with their imaginative and emotional responses to encourage change. Four themes emerged from peoples' qualitative comments: connecting with each other; connecting with our emotions; making us think; the need to keep going. Artists and event organisers who attended a creative follow-up event described the festival as a "series of magic little moments". Several new local initiatives, seeded by the festival, were already progressing within months of the festival ending.

Preface

From Dots, by Khadija Rouf

Time is running –
we must not sleep, the world is burning –
for us to hear the code that's tapping everywhere...
to join the dots in our imaginations...
the composition of stars - the quintessence of all things -
...
Time is running... Join the dots.

Background and aims

ACT was launched as an organisation to help Teignbridge District Council make the transition to Net Zero after declaring a Climate Emergency on 18th April 2019. The group have placed a strong emphasis on sharing relevant scientific knowledge and data with the public and the local authority, particularly around carbon footprints and emissions, offering evidence-based suggestions for practical changes. ACT volunteers became interested in building on this approach after attending two locally run creative events. The first was a climate storytelling gathering, facilitated by local clinical psychologists, and modelled on the Point of Care Schwartz Rounds which are designed to encourage mutual support in health and care settings to help staff “make the unbearable bearable” (Smith, 2023). The second was an improvisational theatre performance by Red Earth, a local Playback Theatre company, in which audience members saw their own stories about climate change played back to them in real time. These two events, with their focus on imagination, connectedness and storytelling, seemed to touch people in ways that facts and figures do not. This inspired the idea of ACT hosting an arts festival to involve and engage local artists with the wider community in care and action for nature and the climate.

Consequently, volunteers from Action on Climate in Teignbridge (ACT) planned an eight day festival in South Devon, *ACT with the Arts*. Their first aim was to inspire people to engage with the climate and ecological crisis through the arts – with exhibitions, performances, dance, poetry, music, film, theatre. Their second aim was to help people connect to their imaginative and emotional responses to the crisis and, by building bridges and resources with the local community, to inspire an up swell in environmental activism and organising. The festival involved 23 arts events across 12 venues in the market town of Newton Abbot and surrounding areas, with around 1200 attendees overall. Events included live music, art exhibitions, theatre performances, poetry readings, film screenings, storytelling and the creation of a Tree of Hope by local school children.

Some questions for people already grappling with the realities of the climate and ecological crisis are – why isn’t everyone terrified? Why don’t our governments seem to be taking the crisis seriously? Why are we sticking to ‘business as usual’? We know that most people of all ages and across the political spectrum express concern

about the climate. Globally, in 2024 53% of people sampled said they are more worried than last year, and 69% said climate change is impacting big life decisions (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). In a survey of 130,000 people across 125 different countries, 86% said they believed in climate change, and 89% demanded an increase in political action to curb the threat of the climate and ecological crisis. In the UK, between 73% and 90% of people agreed that climate change is a serious threat to humanity (Andre et al, 2024).

If most people in the world are concerned, and want to see stronger, more urgent action from their governments, perhaps the wider conversation has moved on from 'is this happening?' to 'what do we do about it?'. And perhaps one of the things we can do about it is get connected – to our emotions and to each other. Difficult emotional responses to the crisis are common – fear, grief, anger, and helplessness. Too much threat with little room for expression or hope can lead to overwhelm: a sense of powerlessness and despair. However, connecting with complex emotions can help us engage with climate action and in turn help us to process and reduce difficult feelings by channelling them into efforts towards positive and sustainable change (Morgan et al, 2022). 'Co-benefits' of engaging our imaginations through music, art and play may help us experience new and more joyful ways of living well together and sustaining the life-giving health of our shared planet.

The ACT with the Arts festival aimed to do just that – to channel the expression of emotional responses to the crisis and in doing so, help to connect people with one another and generate new and more creative and sustainable ways of engaging with the world around us.

This evaluation aimed to gather meaningful feedback to determine the festival's impact, by:

- gathering quantitative and qualitative responses from attendees immediately after events, via sticker dot charts and a reflective logbook;
- gathering qualitative data from artists via a feedback form
- gathering qualitative feedback from artists and ACT members at a creative, reflective session.

Evaluation methods and findings

1. Sticker dot charts

Sticker dot charts and log books were placed near the exit of 12 of the 23 different events (chosen for reasons of convenience), inviting attendees to answer six closed questions with a no, maybe or yes response, and then to elaborate their answers by commenting in the log book:

- Has the festival so far changed the way you think about the climate crisis?
- Has the festival so far changed the way you feel about the climate crisis?
- Has the festival so far changed the way you plan to act about the climate crisis?
- Has the festival so far made you feel more connected with others?
- Has the festival so far been a good way of engaging people (i.e. through the arts)?
- Would you come again?

At some of the events, stewards and members of ACT were available to encourage people to give their answers as they left.

Figure 1.

Example of completed sticker dot chart

Table 1.

*Average responses (in percent/**raw number of dots**) for sticker dot chart questions across all surveyed venues/events*

Has the festival so far...	No (%/raw)	Maybe (%/raw)	Yes (%/raw)
...changed the way you think about the climate crisis?	39/ 49	23/ 21	38/ 60
...changed the way you feel about the climate crisis?	21/ 30	29/ 29	50/ 76
...changed the way you plan to act about the climate crisis?	13/ 17	36/ 42	55/ 80
...made you feel more connected with others ?	4/ 9	13/ 18	83/ 126
...been a good way of engaging people (i.e. through the arts)?	2/ 5	13/ 6	86/ 155
Would you come again?	0/ 1	1/ 2	99/ 173

*Percentages are rounded to nearest whole number

A total of 864 response sticker dots were returned. Addressing the festival aims, 83% of responses indicated that people felt more connected with others through attending and 86% that the arts are a good way of engaging people. 99% of responses indicated that people would come again. Perhaps there were some people in relative isolation, who therefore were ready to be engaged and connected with others, and to come back for more.

In answering closed questions about change, 38% of responses indicated that the festival had changed the way people thought about the climate crisis, 50% that the festival had changed the way people felt about it, and 55% that the festival had changed the way they planned to act. This pattern of responses was possibly shaped by the festival attracting people who were already thinking, feeling and taking some sort of action around their climate concerns. Research (see Webster, 2019)

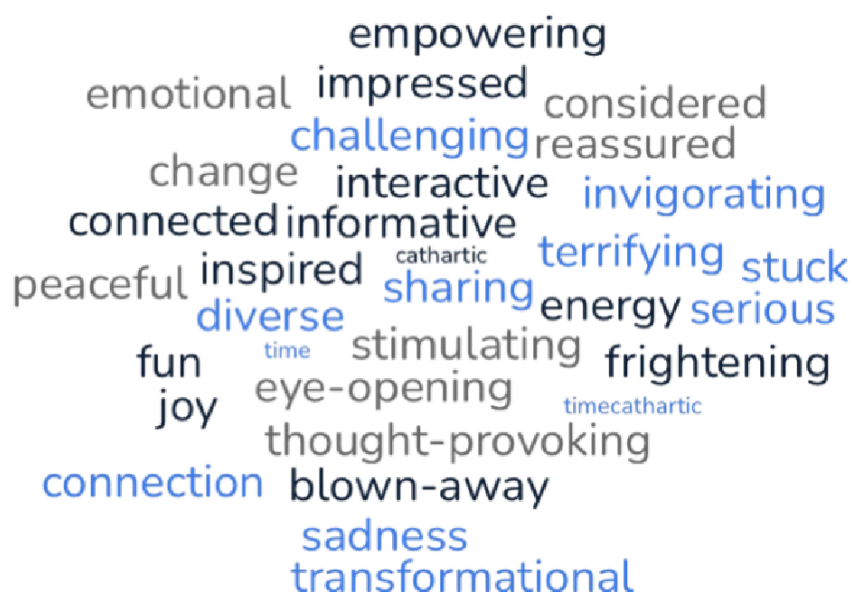
shows that action can flow from people changing their minds and feelings about climate change both positively (eg: hope- 'It's not all hopeless'), and negatively (eg: anger- 'I can't wait for other people!'). By constructively disrupting the status quo for people, we hope that shared experience of climate change arts events will lead to increased pro-environmental action.

2. Logbooks

By each sticker chart, there was also a logbook for people to write down more detailed answers to the above questions and share more specific feedback. This qualitative data helps to deepen our understanding of what lies behind the numbers from the sticker charts. The word cloud below shows some key words taken from peoples' reflections and comments. A total of 138 responses were given.

Figure 2.

Word cloud of key words from logbooks



Themes

Four main themes were drawn from comments and reflections in the logbooks which were also reflected in the artists' survey responses.

Connecting with each other

People felt the festival was “an important space for people to connect”, and for “listening to each other, feeling seen and feeling heard”. This sense of connection was evident in numerous comments. The importance of the festival for bringing people together and providing space for people to connect and share thoughts and ideas meant people were able to have “fabulous conversations that hold the seeds of change”. For some, this meant “putting ideas together and allowing us to connect and solve problems together”. It seemed that the festival and various events allowed for a strengthening of community links. For some, this meant “I am inspired that I am not fighting this alone”. As we know, the climate crisis will affect us all. Strengthening community resilience and togetherness will not only allow us to find solutions together but also to look after one another.

Connecting with our emotions

The emotional toll of the climate and ecological crisis is well recognised and was clear in peoples' responses. Some described the event and art works as “sobering and serious”, but “finding joy in the seriousness” was still possible. Some felt that connecting and expressing emotional responses to the crisis and to the art was “a cathartic experience – “so good to share stories and get emotional”. Connecting with feelings and emotions was made possible as “the arts reach parts that other things aren't able to”. For others, it was as simple as: “I came, I saw, I smiled”.

Making us think

People felt the events were “inspiring, empowering, beautiful” whilst also being “eye opening, thought-provoking, diverse”. Inspiration was a consistent theme: “peaceful and considered – hugely inspirational”. Sharing thoughts, feelings and ideas gave

new life and energy: “invigorating to share thoughts and feelings with people with varying views and ideas”.

The need to keep going

The most energetic comments were captured in this theme. People spoke of the festival as “transformational” and there were calls for “let’s keep it going” and “let’s get under the skin of society”. Others thought that “people need to wake up!” but there was uncertainty about how to translate the learning from the festival into change: “how can we harness all this energy for change?”. The sense of urgency was felt too: “let’s not get stuck in time”.

3. Artists’ feedback

Huddled together in a small room above a pub in South Devon, a group of artists are having an animated discussion about the climate and ecological crisis. It is a serious, but not sombre, conversation. People speak of feelings of hope, energy, togetherness, connection. “Magic is happening”, one says. It feels like one of those organic and unpredictable historic moments.

After this sharing experience at the feedback event, 32 artists returned feedback forms. 12/29 of these had not heard of ACT before the festival, but 31 said they would or might take part in something similar again. In addition to the themes above, many offered appreciation for the organisers and administration as well as constructive ideas for improvements in future.

4. Feedback event

Artists who took part in the festival, as well as the organisers of the festival and other members of ACT were invited to a creative follow up event to hear and respond to some preliminary results of this evaluation. Twenty people attended this feedback

event. We put the **sticker dot charts and each of the themes from the logbooks** (above) up on the walls around the room and invited attendees to walk around, mingle, and choose the logbook theme that resonated most for them. Then, with others who had chosen that same theme, we asked people to form a 'pod' and to discuss why that theme had resonated and any other reflections from the festival. We then asked pods to create their own story of the event and to imagine what might begin to happen going forwards.

Only one group stuck to this idea of imagining a story of going forwards, while other groups instead gave helpful reflections on their experience of the festival. We then invited each pod to feedback what they had discussed and the story they had created. Red Earth Playback Theatre actors acted out each of these reflections for us.

Interestingly, three pods emerged around the themes of *connecting with each other*, *connecting with emotions*, and *the need to keep going*. No one chose the theme *making us think*. This fits with the research around the impact of emotions and community connection in helping us to engage with the distressing reality of the climate and ecological crisis. It may also reflect the point about many attendees seeming climate interested already.

Story 1: the power changed

The first group chose the theme *connecting with each other*. They imagined that Rishi Sunak had heard about the festival taking place, and that he had been frightened by the growing energy in the South West. For this reason, he called a General Election and lost by a landslide. This led to many positive changes and "cured" climate change. The changes included well-insulated homes, renewable energy investment, wildlife populations starting to rejuvenate: "and all that from one seed".

Story 2: a ripple effect

The second group chose the theme *connecting with emotions*. They felt that connecting with emotions was the key to making change. They were passionate about the need for change, and thought that behaviour change comes from connections between people and people with their emotions. The festival helped to break down barriers and allowed people to create networks like the trees with their roots. There were mixed emotions – both good and bad. They felt that grassroots changes would help us all live sustainably on the Earth, help us be more connected with nature and each other, and that this would have a ripple effect: like the mycelium network and the root network, the feelings and passion would be infectious.

Story 3: who knows where the ripples may flow?

The third group chose the theme *we need to keep going*. The group felt that there was something special about the arts for engaging people – and that this involves having to trust that you will make an impact. They wondered how we might take the energy generated from the festival and move it further out. The main question for them was, where do we go from here? Some of the group spoke of being at a low point before the festival. But the festival gave them a feeling of hope that they hadn't felt in a long time. They thought that, if we can do this in Newton Abbot and have this effect, what could we do if we thought more widely? If we look ahead and think about which levers of power to pull, at all levels (individual, community, organisational), what change might we make for the positive? One tricky thing about thinking about what next, is that there is no recipe for what occurred. It was a series of "magic little moments".

Participants' final reflections from the feedback event

Following the playback theatre performances, there were some final reflections from the group. There were feelings of hope, energy, togetherness, connection. Some people commented that before the festival, people and groups had been disparate and separate – different people with different ideas yet thinking and talking about the same thing without knowing of others' concerns. People felt inspired by their festival

engagement and there was a sense of momentum – that “magic is happening”. But some felt confused about where to go next. Certainly events could be replicated, but magic by its nature is unpredictable. Arts council funding is an important “lifeline”, but people felt there would be a need for more than one lifeline to build a bigger movement. Overall there was a strong feeling of energy and potential for a big movement for artists to come together and to have a voice in climate and environmental engagement and action.

Discussion: what next?

Returning to that lively and hope filled conversation between the artists: can the magic that the artists and organisers shared while reflecting together after seeing their stories enacted, continue onwards?

The evaluation overall indicated that the festival aims were amply met: first to inspire people to engage with the climate and ecological crisis through the arts, and second to help people to connect with their imaginative and emotional responses to encourage change.

Within four months of the festival ending, new projects have been seeded. One has already opened: an art exhibition celebrating the power of the ocean and calling for its protection. The organiser attributed his determination to create the exhibition to his success in offering an event at the Festival which he described as: “...a powerful and dynamic experience with an excellent attendance of focussed individuals with clearly a passion for the Ocean and marine life. From this positive experience I felt I had a platform to develop further ideas and went on to plan a River Celebration event and a month long conceptual art exhibition”.

ACT as an organisation has created a new arts group where the passion and energy the festival created will help guide future plans. The first project will be a legacy from the festival’s Tree of Hope. This ambitious community environmental project will focus on local communities’ relationships with nature. Everyone will be invited to

submit words or phrases which will be painted as a chorus into a 12-metre artwork on a busy walkway in the centre of Newton Abbot.

A second project will culminate in local performances over two nights by 200 children. Various workshops will be woven into their existing curriculums to enable them to create music, art, songs and poetry about the impact of climate and environmental change and their future hopes for a better fairer and sustainable future. The concert will close with a song celebrating the community tree.

The energy of the festival seems set to ripple on in other new and unexpected ways into the future, given the hopeful responses of attendees and artists amidst the uncertainties of this historic time of climate and environmental breakdown and global turmoil. It is encouraging that such a large proportion of attendees felt that the festival had helped them to feel more connected with others. Recent research quoted above (Andre et al, op cit) revealed not only widespread support for climate action, but also that people systematically underestimate how willing their fellow citizens are to act. Raising awareness that most people, not only the obvious activists, want action, seems critically important in bringing about a unified response to climate change. The festival and future events may help to break down peoples' preconceived ideas about being alone in their concerns, or that climate activists are different from other people, by enabling them to see that there is more popular support than they realised and thereby engage everyone to pull together for change.

Since the festival, ACT organisers have received requests for advice from other environmental groups elsewhere in the country who said they have been inspired to try something similar. Perhaps ACT is ahead of the game in a growing shift to new ways of envisaging our future: new social imaginaries? This would fit with an emerging social and political sense that emotional engagement, imagination and creativity really matter to people, and are critical elements of the system change that is needed for a sustainable future (Bristow et al 2024). If so, let's try to rise to the challenge, and continue to connect and inspire the creative magic that can make change happen.

References

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Appendix

Attendance rates were collected for 8 of the 23 events. No data was collected for 11 of the 23 events. The number of attendees across all events (estimated at a total of around 1200) ranged between 10 and 250. There are many reasons for this such as that some events ran through the whole 8 days, and others for just one hour. Some events were run in parallel with others. Some events while consecutive were held in different local towns.

Numbers of responders per event varied between 5 and 58 (reflecting event attendee numbers and mindful that feedback was only encouraged where stewards

were available). This represents a response rate of between 20 and 80% of attendees across events where data was collected, and attendance recorded. When dividing the total number of response sticker dots (864) by number of questions (6) an average of 144 (range 130-176) responses per question can be obtained. This estimates the number of people responding to each question across all events.

It is tempting to include further interpretation of the data collected, but this must at this stage be regarded as speculative.

It may be that nature based events were popular.

It seems that 'audience passive' events (such as the film and poetry) had a greater impact on changing feelings.

It seems that 'participatory' events (such as Join the Dots Storytelling and Playback Theatre) had a greater impact on feeling connected.