

Citizen Objects

Sculpture as a vehicle to communicate scientific knowledge in public engagement

Keywords: democracy, data, public engagement, art, information design, science, policy

Abstract

Transforming society for a more sustainable future depends on the effective communication of complex scientific knowledge and the successful engagement of citizens in the decision and implementation of changes to their lives. However, representing complex scientific findings through abstract data can present a barrier to citizens' understanding and prevent them from participating in the public processes designed to support this transformation. Furthermore, the rise in digital consultation platforms is proliferating restrictive forms of disembodied interaction that further abstract the issues at stake from their physical and social realities and inhibit more intuitive, open-ended or critical encounters.

If we want citizens to participate in important decisions about how we can live more sustainably in a meaningful way, we need to devise more inclusive and critical methods of communicating knowledge in consultations. 'Citizen Objects' proposes to transform how we engage people by creating an alternative form of communicating data through sculpture. The project explores the potential of sculptural visualisations to render the physical implications of abstract data tangible and intuitively accessible to non-experts and create direct encounters between people, places and the issues at stake. It will investigate the possibility of placing art objects into the spaces affected by change to generate an alternative form of engagement that evokes intuitive understanding, open debate and critical reflection.

The project will be integrated into an ongoing consultation process conducted by a RIFS research group. The project will collaborate with RIFS researchers, citizens and project partners to iterate and test different models for making and deploying sculptural visualisations of data as part of the consultation. The resulting participatory methods and techniques will be documented and compiled to form a manual that can be used by governments and citizens alike to ensure greater inclusivity and transparency around data in societal transformation for sustainability.

Project Proposal

Citizen Objects proposes to use sculptural representations of data to aid the communication of complex knowledge in public engagement processes aimed at building a collective public mandate for sustainability policy. Over a period of 12 months, I will contribute to the planning, design and delivery of a collaborative public consultation conducted by a RIFS research group (such as *Co-creation in Democratic Practice*). Through a process of observation, workshops with RIFS researchers, their project partners and citizens I will design a set of art objects that can act as alternative vehicles to communicate key facts to the affected public, thus creating a bridge between science, policy and society through art. The objects will be made from recycled household materials and appear temporarily in public places as part of scheduled consultation events. The project will culminate in an exhibition of the objects in a public art venue alongside documentation of their role in the consultation process and a summary of the developed representational and participative methods in a publication.

Significance

Public engagement has been identified as the key to realising an effective, socially just and sustainable transition towards a carbon-neutral society.¹ In order to build the general public's long-term cooperation necessary for the implementation of sustainable policy in practice, it is essential to effectively communicate scientific findings and intended policy changes to citizens and genuinely involve them in identifying local challenges and opportunities to their adoption. However, the complexity of information from both sustainability science and policy presents a significant barrier to public communication and the effectiveness and inclusivity of current forms of public engagement is contested.² The rise of digital consultation platforms has contributed to further distance environmental issues from their physical place of action and impact in our communities. If we want to close the transmission gap between sustainability research, policy and implementation we need to develop more inclusive methods for the communicating of knowledge. 'Citizen objects' proposes art as the gamechanger in overcoming these barriers to transformation. Data physicalisation³ has been identified as a potential tool to broaden participation in public consultations and 'Citizen objects' will utilise the materiality, scale and physical presence of sculptures to create intuitive forms of reception that make abstract information tangible and accessible to non-experts⁴ and inspire alternative forms of engagement. While there are successful examples of physicalisations of data to raise climate awareness (Posavec⁵ and Eliasson⁶), their use as part of participatory public consultation processes is currently underexplored. The project will make a significant and urgent contribution to innovating the approach to public participation in climate change through sculpture.

¹ 'Engaging the Public on Climate Change: What We've Learned', *Centre For Public Impact (CPI)* <<https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/engaging-the-public-on-climate-change-what-we-ve-learned>> [accessed 27 July 2023].

² Ruhet Genç, 'The Importance of Communication in Sustainability & Sustainable Strategies', *Procedia Manufacturing*, 8 (2017), 511–16 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.promfg.2017.02.065>>.

³ Sandra Bae, Danielle Albers Szafir, and Ellen Yi-Luen Do, 'Exploring the Benefits and Challenges of Data Physicalization', in *Proceedings of ETIS 2022* (presented at the CEUR, Toulouse, France, 2022).

⁴ *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. by Lorraine Daston (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2007).

⁵ 'Air Transformed: Better with Data Society, Sheffield', *Stefanie Posavec* <<https://www.stefanieposavec.com/airtransformed>> [accessed 27 July 2023].

⁶ 'Green River • Artwork • Studio Olafur Eliasson' <<https://olafureliasson.net/artwork/green-river-1998/>> [accessed 27 July 2023].

Aims and outcomes

Citizen Objects aims to innovate public engagement strategies around sustainability and transform current methods of knowledge transfer between sustainability research, policy and practice in democratic participatory processes through art making.

The project will build an alternative model for the communication of data through factually accurate and evocative sculptures that complement and expand existing public consultation practices.

Besides the ambition to make scientific knowledge more easily accessible to a broader audience, 'Citizen Objects' aims to increase the public's critical agency in their encounter and processing of climate knowledge and hopes to inspire reflection. The communication of complex facts through simple material visualisations aims to allow people to recognise them as part of their daily lives. Foregrounding tactile understanding and sensory experience in this process aims to bridge the gap between the generalised and supposedly objective data used in science and politics and people's personal, lived experience of the world. 'Citizen Objects' intends to create more meaningful transitions between research and practice and to add a quality to the culture of consultation that allows people to feel, imagine and reflect on new practices and perspectives.

Process

I propose a practice-based form of research through art making, co-design and public engagement. I will use an experimental, co-creative and iterative working method to develop and adapt the project brief and outcome to respond to input and feedback from researchers, project partners and participants throughout.

I will start the project by getting to know the consultation context, RIFS working methods and the participants in order to establish how best to integrate and contribute my work to the participative process conducted by the RIFS group. I will run workshops with RIFS researchers, their partners and the participant group to collaborate with researchers and citizens on identifying issues and data sets that lend themselves to visualisation through sculpture and co-designing a brief for this work. We will discuss suitable venues and established mutually beneficial ways of involving and presenting the objects as part of the consultation process. I will also host a workshop with citizens to introduce my artistic method and invite participants to try to create their own simple data visualisations from everyday materials. I will then spend 6 months on the collaborative development, production and presentation of a set of art objects. I will work on sketches and models in a studio space to experiment with materials, forms and scale and review those sketches in a feedback session with RIFS researchers before producing a set of full-scale sculptures from recycled household materials. The sculptures will be presented in public spaces and used as part of consultation exercises scheduled by the RIFS group on site. The project will culminate in an exhibition of the project in a cultural venue in Berlin, a collaborative evaluation session with RIFS researchers and fellows and the publication of the representational and participatory methods developed in the project in a manual.

Feasibility

I have extensive experience in working collaboratively with a wide range of practitioners and communities on creative projects and have tested the use of sculptures to visualise data in various public settings (see portfolio in APPENDIX). This experience together with the expertise of the RFS research groups in devising and conducting successful consultation processes will

ensure that the project is of high artistic quality, ethically conducted, professionally executed, and thoroughly documented.