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Realizing Urban Water Pollution Impact In Melbourne, Australia Through Painting

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Realizing Urban Water Pollution Impact In Melbourne, Australia Through Painting

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Abstract and Keywords

Throughout the month of November 2016, I undertook a creative environmental art project in Melbourne, Australia. I chose to create a water-soluble oil painting (dimensions 3 ft. x 4 ft.) that represents water pollution problems in the city of Melbourne, particularly in Port Phillip Bay. These problems include toxic stormwater runoff, plastics pollution and plastic nurdles, as well as nutrient buildup and algal overgrowth. The painting includes messages regarding sustainability; sustainable action limits the use of our natural resources so that humans can preserve the environment for future generations rather than degrade it. In the painting, I combine conceptual and compositional strategy with overt references to pollution problems in order to have viewers consider their own role in environmental destruction. The ultimate goal of this facilitated reflection was to inspire improved environmental action from the viewer.

As part of this endeavor, I conducted background research concerning the origins of environmental art, finding that environmental attitudes have been depicted in painting for hundreds of years. I also researched Australian environmental art and discovered many positive examples that exemplify art's highly unique methods of provoking environmental understanding. Art's ability to promote sustainability exists in its inherent psychological and emotional appeals. While many Melbourne water pollution initiatives exist, I created my painting assuming that the cause could still benefit from environmental art.

As part of my research, I interviewed two Australian environmental artists as part of my research, John Dahlsen and Debbie Symons. These conversations informed my artwork and gave insight into the world of professional environmental art. Additionally, with the assistance of Public Art Officer Georgia Rouette, I arranged to publicly display my painting along the St. Kilda Beach boardwalk. Throughout two days of public display, I collected observational data and conversational accounts regarding viewer response to my art. While it is impossible to state how many individuals actually changed their environmental actions after seeing my painting, the viewer response was positive and many people were able to see my work. Ultimately, I concluded that environmental art, including the piece that I produced, has an important role in the environmentalist movement. While educational in nature, environmental art often presents unattractive problems in a beautiful and approachable way. I believe that the aesthetics that I developed in my piece, as well as those found in other environmental artworks, spread knowledge and motivate change by challenging viewers to imagine environmental problems in a new way.

Keywords: sustainability, environmental art, painting, water pollution, water-mixable oil paint, microplastics

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1. Introduction

1.1 Medium and rationale

For this project, I have created a large scale water-soluble oil painting. I chose this medium because I have undertaken two semesters of training using water-mixable oil paints at my home university. In order to create a crisp visual with a clear message, I chose the medium that I believe I am most proficient in. The purpose of my work is to give reality to the imperative environmental issue of water pollution in Melbourne, Australia by visually representing a connection between the urban dweller and serious environmental destruction. My goal was to convey that the environmental impact of urban behaviors are still very apparent within the urban community itself, although many urban denizens may not be aware of the problems.

Water-mixable oil paints are vibrant and allow me to be precise in my color choice. Since oil paints have a longer drying time than most other paints, I was also able to paint objects with great intent and patience. In order to instill the reality of water pollution to Melbourne citizens or others who view the painting, I needed to be able to create high contrasts of color, accurately render forms, and craft a dynamic composition that attracts the eye and remains memorable. Oil paints are exceptionally blend-able, especially water-mixable oils; this allowed me to produce a painting with the appropriate texture. The element of texture in my work facilitated several sustainable themes in my painting and was highly conducive to rendering plastic pollutants as well as the skin of my figures. The ultimate goal of promoting sustainability through my painting would have been more difficult to achieve with a less versatile medium, as establishing poignant clarity within my visual required the opportunity to easily make refinements as I painted. Given the time frame to complete my project, October 31st 2016 - December 1st 2016, the decision to make a single painting rather than create a series was necessary. If I were to make a series, I would have been forced to sacrifice the scale (3 feet by 4 feet) of my current work, which would have compromised any lasting impression of grandeur that is necessary to captivate a viewer and encourage closer examination.

1.2 The concept of sustainability

Since the term ‘sustainable,’ or ‘sustainability’ was first coined, it has lost much of its meaning as it has become increasingly fashionable in mainstream culture. Many people encounter the term ‘sustainable’ as brand tactically applied to many consumer goods rather than a meaningful concept integral to finding the solution to our environmental problems. The Brundtland Report from 1987 endorses the concept of ‘sustainable development’, and acknowledges several key elements of sustainability that we still support today, such as the ability to sustain the basic needs of a population while maintaining intergenerational equity, intragenerational equity, and limited use of resources. This report describes how sustainable development functions to “ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply...limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 16). This early definition of sustainability, while still controversially promoting ‘development’ and failing to account for the innate rights of nature barring its utilitarian values, *does* acknowledge that the crux of sustainable behavior is consistent equity, protecting resource bases from erosion, and recognizing the inherent limitations within the land. Sustainability also operates under the precautionary principle, which was “affirmed by the European Union (EU) in 1990 in its Bergen Declaration on Sustainable Development, which requires ecological preservation in cases of scientific uncertainty where serious or irreversible damage is threatened” (Basiago 1995, p.109). This means that until there is scientific certainty about the environmental effects of a given action, the action should not be taken.

The historically consistent relationship between art and the natural environment has allowed for these concepts of sustainability to appear in environmental art. Throughout history, art has provided an avenue for people to express frustration towards the current state of the world or a platform to sound a call to action. As the environment has always been associated with politics and human development, the history of art and the environment describes a codependent relationship that has matured alongside our societies, values, and moral concerns.

1.3 *The origins of environmental art*

If you have ever struggled to conceptualize issues of environmental destruction, the science that supports it, the scale of the catastrophe, or the importance of the natural world, then environmental art could be the missing link to your deeper emotional understandings of these issues.

Themes of environmentalism, whether purposefully included or not, have been depicted in art ever since the birth of landscape painting. Landscape painting requires communion with the land via rigorous and meditative observation; this practice usually nurtures a sensitive appreciation for the natural world. The artist's profound experience of awe is then transmitted to the painting's audience. The purpose of some early landscape painting, especially romantic paintings, was to inspire spiritual connections to natural beauty. However, intentional and positive messages dealing explicitly with the environmentalist movement were excluded from early landscape painting. This was not only because the movement had yet to begin, but also because landscape painting often contained colonialist themes. Elizabeth Deloughrey, a professor from UCLA, explains that landscape painting is not a human-centric practice that follows a given template, but it is rather a process of cultivating a specific language between the painter, other humans, and the surrounding land (Deloughrey 2004, p. 299). When Frederic Edwin Church painted *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica* in 1867, his attempt to convey the untouched grandeur of the natural landscape ultimately resulted in a colonialist narrative of environmental extraction despite his attempts to erase it. This can be observed in the painting's landscape itself; while it is free of human inhabitants, "the terrain of the valley, as painted by Church, displays the impact of deforestation and the soil depletion that comes from the resulting erosion; its trees are part of the patchy second growth that signals hillsides that have sustained too many ground-provision crops...The hills on the left half and center of the painting are characteristic of the impact left on the landscape by plantation-era misuse...Rather than pristine nature suggesting divinely-created wilderness, the painting captures the changing ecological dynamics of a post-emancipation society" (Paravisini-Gebert, 2009, p. 89). Here, instead of problematising rapid environmental destruction due to colonial pressures, or even commenting on the depletion of St. Thomas's exquisite environment, landscape painting is instead used as a vehicle of erasure. In this work, environmental violence in Jamaica is ignored in the pursuit of falsely depicting a wild, lush, and archaic environment. This exotic depiction exists not to evoke

awe and amazement in the interest of environmental appreciation and protection, but to visually describe a new, untouched frontier that is ripe for utilization. However, because painting is based on close observation of the landscape in order to accurately render it, the evidence of erasure is in the land itself. Here, the underlying structures of environmental painting, such as cultivating an intimate relationship with the land, inherently undermine an attempt to disregard the true value of environmental interactions as a spiritual experience.

Recalling early examples of painting that focus on the environment is important in portraying the evolution of art towards incorporating activist messages. However, it is critical to remember that painting has almost consistently depicted the important societal events, socially prevalent struggles, and the overall emotional climate of its time period. For example, *The Oxbow* by Thomas Cole, painted in 1836, comments on the relationship between human expansion in America and the subsequent disappearance of wilderness. In this painting, “The savagery of the storm clouds over the wilderness retreats from the advancing cultivated landscape of civilization...The concerns expressed in Cole's painting reflected the debate among Americans. Would the wilderness disappear completely for the sake of civilization, or would the two exist in perpetual tension with one another?”(Johns, 1996). During a time of expansion, Cole encapsulates a wide-spread American uncertainty. While one can also interpret the painting as a depiction of wilderness being tamed and ‘civilised’ for the benefit of the nation, it is quite clear that social concerns and political endeavors have been consistently depicted in paintings for much of recent history. It is easy to believe that as these political and social concerns shifted away from questions of expansion towards concerns about environmental impacts and preservation, that these new ideas could also be incorporated into painting and other works of art. Unsurprisingly, as the environmentalism movement grew, so did the production of art representing its values, many examples of which are being produced here in Australia.

Before this shift towards activism, however, the earlier history of Australian painting also reinforces the simultaneous and interdependent evolutions of art and society. Before colonizers arrived in Australia, indigenous Australians were making art “which dates back more than 30,000 years, [and] cannot be separated from a deep relationship with the landscape...While some works of Aboriginal art do explicitly show the physical relationship between different aspects of the landscape, the mythical meaning is always paramount. The paintings also mirror changes in society: trading patterns, the growing influence of governments and churches, and the

struggle for survival” (Wentworth Galleries, 2016, para 2). Aboriginal art has historically embodied a spiritual connection to country and codependence between land and humans, the concepts that make up the foundation of Aboriginal worldview. When this relationship was threatened, the art that Aboriginals produced responded accordingly.

As art is an archive of experience, opinion, and change, it is unsurprising that as colonization dominated the Australian landscape, European art with colonial themes also emerged as the dominant artistic force (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2016, para. 1). This resulted in the production of paintings that encapsulate similar insensitivities as Edwin Church’s Jamaica painting. Aboriginal art received little attention as “British art and cultural perceptions [dominated Australian art] for most of the first century after colonisation in the late 1700s. Its artists, trained in Europe, were preoccupied with depicting the unfamiliar land, and landscape emerged as the chief subject of colonial Australian art”(Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2016, para. 1). With the possessive colonialist gaze emerging in Euro-Australian art, environments that aboriginals had delicately and aptly managed for millenniums became extorted even in colonial painting. These culturally valuable sites were exoticised instead of depicted with a spiritual intention. For example, “Tom Roberts, an English immigrant working in the 1880's, painted the bush, focusing on the lives of ordinary Australian people and the triumph of pioneers over their wild environment. One of Roberts' most famous works is *Shearing the Rams*, which depicts the wool industry – Australia's first export industry and a crucial part of Australian rural life” (Wentworth Galleries, 2016, para. 7). However, many modern artists have progressed in understanding human dominance, possession, and extraction of the environment as a dangerous and catastrophic occurrence rather than a noble and admirable practice. Thus, much art involving the natural landscape has stopped reinforcing environmental degradation and begun opposing it.

1.4 The connection between art and social change

In a world where scientific information has the potential to inform the laws and policies by which we lead our lives, the still-widespread neglect of climate change amidst an overwhelming supply of scientific evidence is astounding. In many cases, art can both enhance and reinforce scientific evidence where facts and figures may lack influence. An article in

Conservation Magazine describes how art makes environmental change a reality and the unique importance of this ability. Bill Chameides reflects that “scientific information, no matter how solid, is unable to persuade a good many of people of the reality of climate change...[but] it’s one thing to look at a map and see where flooding may occur, it’s another to realize that the spot where you’re standing...will be underwater someday. That’s the power of performance art” (Chameides, 2014). The reality of climate change and other environmental issues seems more tangible, immediate, and legitimate when presented through physical manifestations; a visual depiction of climate change in this case delivers a more poignant and persuasive message than factual scientific reports, which can seem inaccessible and distant. While scientific evidence is extremely important in legitimising issues of climate change, pollution, and other degradations, the addition of an emotionally appealing visual to supplement factual evidence simply makes it easier to ‘get the picture’.

John Sabraw, an American artist based in Ohio who uses toxic sludge to create his own pigments for painting, describes the relationship between artist and science as such: “scientists and artists share two critical aspects: curiosity and failure,” said Sabraw. ‘We are endlessly curious, try new things, and fail often. But that failure does not dampen our curiosity. So the artist, like the scientist, has a crucial role to perform in our society: see things differently, act on this vision, report the failures and successes” (Brooks, 2013, para 10). Research exists that supports art’s ability to convey multi-faceted ideas in an interesting and emotional way; some works of art “articulate a vision for an ecologically sustainable landscape [while others]...evoke a strong sense of connection through their aesthetic language” (Reid, Reeve,Curtis, 2005, p. 4). While art can have an extremely similar goal to science, it accesses its audience in a much more evocative and memorable fashion. Promoting sustainability requires a large variety of appeals; raising awareness and calling for behavioral changes requires active engagement of a diverse audience composed of individuals who learn in different ways. When contemplating the various avenues of delivering environmentalist messages, “It is important to remember that while we need the rational, practical knowledge of science, we also need the unique personal, aesthetic responses that art provides. These responses can engage the personal values and emotions that are so crucial to motivate action.” (Karoly D., Abrahams, G., 2015). Information holds immeasurable importance and influence, but personally, I certainly have a greater emotional

reaction to a visual than a data set. I believe that I can safely assume that other individuals also share in this experience.

In fact, the sheer influence of visual communications is evidenced in western economies. Economic growth being the ultimate goal in western capitalist societies creates a colossal platform for consumer culture. Within this framework, visuals are employed in every imaginable way in order to convince people that consumerism equates to happiness, thus directing their economic spending. The dynamism of visual advertisements has established the widespread belief that a given society is inferior and underdeveloped until it can consume an extensive range of superfluous goods. These products undeniably cause environmental damage during their production, distribution, and disposal. The power of illustration to convince people to partake in certain negative environmental behavior is virtually indescribable, and I believe this power can be harnessed and effectively utilized within the sphere of environmental art. If visual messages can influence a person's spending patterns, then visual messages should also be able to influence one's other environmental behaviors.

Most would agree that "Each of us, sometime and somewhere in our lives, has been profoundly moved by a piece of art; a song, a poem, a book, a painting or a film. The values and desires inherent here become absorbed into our psyche, they inform our response, and are embedded to form the person we can be and the societies we construct."(Buckland, D., Ostendorf, Y., 2013, para. 1) . The psychological pathos innately present in art is the source of its social influence and capacity to arouse action; in other words, "We need storytellers to tease out meaning and hope"(Buckland, D., Ostendorf, Y., 2013, para. 7). During any pertinent period throughout social history, one will not only discover examples of art that these storytellers have created, but also a group of people that the art has influenced.

1.5 Australian environmental art

The benefits of environmental art are not lost in Australia, as there are many environmental artists living and working here. John Dahlsen is one of them, and has produced many landscapes and seascapes in Byron Bay that have to do with society's disconnect from nature. Dr Jacqueline Millner from the University of Western Sydney describes these paintings as "dark works whose subtle references to environmental degradation all but disappear before

forcefully catching you unawares...tension between inorganic abstraction and emotionally charged organism...play out, in elegant and economical aesthetics, the unstable boundaries between the natural and the artificial” (Dahlsen, 2016, para. 5). Byron Bay, a beach town that has attracted increased tourist visitation as time has progressed, does seem to exist on the boundary between natural and artificial. An incredible amount of natural beauty and meaningful Aboriginal country sits only meters away from the town and its countless businesses. Dahlsen prompts his viewer to think deeply about this relationship, muting the vivid scenery that he paints by using blocky shapes and understated grays. He challenges the viewer to join him in looking at the land through a rather disillusioned point of view, understanding the reality of Byron Bay beyond its standings as a bohemian attraction.

Katherine Cooper, an environmental painter from Tasmania, invites her viewers to observe the simple moments of natural beauty that we often take for granted. Cooper “is dedicated to raising awareness of the beauty and the fragility of our wildlife and the habits in which they co-exist with humans. She hopes that through her art, she can inspire others to stop, observe their surroundings...and, in doing so, begin to appreciate the truly complex and intricate balance of our natural world” (Tasmanian Arts Guide, 2016, para. 2-3). Sustainability has its roots in a profound appreciation of the natural world, which then transfers into positive environmental action and hopefully the prevention of further degradations. Cooper is also involved in a large collaborative project regarding the various impacts of plastics pollution on our oceans, a project that has garnered a large group of supporters and sponsors.

Barbary O’Brien, another Australian environmental painter, creates inspired work rooted in the conception that the land ‘owns’ her; therefore, this work evidently portrays the monumental importance of the natural environment resulting from this belief (O’Brien, 2016). One of her works, *Bare Island*, shows an abstracted figure that appears to be a sleeping woman, half submerged in the ocean with her exposed half forming the terrain of an island. Here, she depicts the non-existent separation between human and environment. This visual provokes important personal contemplation, as we each commit small acts of violence on the natural world regularly in our daily lives. Since these actions are compounding more rapidly than many of us have expected, witnessing an illustrative portrayal of the interdependent relationship between human and nature may serve as a reminder to reconsider our destructive actions.

In 2015, a Melbourne based organization called CLIMARTE organized a compelling exhibit, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, which “explore[d] societal illusions that the world will always be there when we wake up tomorrow...[The exhibit utilized] playful, innovative, and dynamic approaches from six artists...[in order to] communicate some semblance of a future hope”(CLIMARTE, 2015, para. 1& 2). This exhibit was part of a massive CLIMARTE festival, which included “25 exhibitions, 46 public programs, attracted over 75,000 visitors and inspired a combined print, radio and online audience of over 13,000,000 to join the conversation”(CLIMARTE, 2016, para. 3). In fact, the incredible response to this festival was impressive enough to warrant a second ART + CLIMATE = CHANGE festival which will take place in 2017.

In certain instances, a piece of art has become the face of an environmental campaign, serving as the motivating symbol of an activist movement. *Rock Island Bend*, a photograph by Peter Domrovskis taken in 1979 “was reproduced more than one million times as part of a campaign to save the Franklin and Lower Gordon Rivers from proposed dams. *Rock Island Bend* became a visual embodiment of the campaign to protect these rivers in the lead up to the 1983 Federal Election...[and] showed the Australian public what was at risk: a transcendent place, a wild mysterious landscape, the Nature of our unconscious...too beautiful to be destroyed”(Karoly, 2015, para. 6-7). This example shows that art can cooperate with an environmental campaign to create powerful synergy. *Rock Island Bend* served not only as a reminder of what was at stake, but was a *recognizable* physical manifestation of the emotional investments and environmental expectations of a large group of people.

The number of environmental artists in Australia is certainly impressive. Australian farmer and artists Diana Boyer produced a Time Change animation in 2006, which resulted in a “powerful and at times whimsical animation [that] shows the life of a female farmer in the Binalong district in the future, when global warming has profoundly altered patterns of farm activity”(National Museum Australia, 2016, para. 9). There is also Australian artist Catherine Woo, whose “works provide a visual exploration of the inter-relationship between humans, their bodies and the natural environment. Her delicate, abstract forms...draw forth various analogies between the body and the environment”(Despard Gallery, 2016, para. 1). Discovering so many Australian artists who aim to visually interpret the crucial connections between human life and

the deteriorating natural environment greatly encouraged my own endeavor into environmental painting.

1.6 *Water pollution in Melbourne*

While Melbourne is home to many sustainability initiatives, all cities are undeniable hubs of consumerism and massive sources of garbage output. Thus, sustainability is a consistent and important topic to present in urban environments. In fact, an article by Kylie Adoranti of the *Inner South News* describes the alarming likelihood that plastic rubbish dropped on the street in Melbourne will end up in its bays in the form of small plastic ‘nurdles’. These are minute plastic fragments resulting from the breakdown of larger plastic items. Their small size makes it easy for them to enter waterways by passing through litter screens on storm-water drains (Melbourne litter screens can only catch litter the size of a cigarette butt or larger). These small bits of plastic, also called microplastics, can remain in waterways for decades. Because of the misleading shape and size of plastic nurdles, fish or birds often mistake them for food and consume them. Since plastic can absorb other toxins from the water, this proves detrimental to the health of these species and to humans who consume these fish. Baykeeper Neil Blake warns that if something does not change, “Port Phillip will become a plastic soup” (Adoranti, 2014, para. 6).

Like any urban metropolis, the city of Melbourne has far more impervious surface (concrete, pavement, etc.) than green space. High concentrations of impervious surface cause a significant influx of water pollution in Melbourne’s waterways, because “When it rains, most rainfall runs off impervious surfaces such as roofs and roads and is typically transported directly and quickly to waterways through a drainage system...with limited opportunities for infiltration into the ground, evaporation and transpiration via plants in the landscape...The stormwater drainage system transports many toxicants to waterways including heavy metals and persistent organic compounds. Toxicants accumulate in sediment and bind to organic matter and may enter the food chain by accumulating in mussels and fish.”(Melbourne Water, 2013, p. 12-13). Unfortunately, all stormwater drains in Melbourne connect to Port Phillip Bay (Garbage & Cleaning Services, 2016, para. 2). After a strong storm hit Melbourne in 2011, thirteen beaches, including St. Kilda, were deemed to have water quality that was too poor for swimming because the storm “washed pollutants — including debris, rubbish, cigarette butts, topsoil and dog

droppings — off the streets and into drains and local waterways, which eventually drained into the bay” (Levy, 2011, para. 6). High levels of pollution leaves St. Kilda beaches a danger not only to people, but also to the penguin population of Melbourne. In Port Phillip Bay, “St. Kilda’s famous penguin colony...[carries] high levels of arsenic, mercury and lead in their blood...[likely because] dredging has disturbed and moved polluted sediment which has then led to the contaminated particles to enter the penguin’s food source” (Schetzer, 2015, para 1-3).

Tim Flannery, in an article for *The Monthly*, recounts the Port Phillip Bay that he remembers from childhood, its centerpiece being its coral reefs. After being apart from Port Phillip Bay for thirty years, he details his experience returning to one of his favorite childhood reefs, finding that “Instead of a beautiful rocky reef covered in coral, [he] floated above a cesspit of green scum...[The change was due to] eutrophication...[a process] caused by an excess run-off of nitrogen and phosphorus”. Since the Bay only swaps one percent of its water with the ocean every year, these nutrients are able to build up excessively. Flannery warns that an expansive algal bloom in Port Phillip Bay is a future possibility, as there is a continually shrinking amount of green buffer to absorb pollution before it enters the water, resulting in even more “dog [droppings], rotten food, spilt petrol and oil, excess lawn fertiliser and other toxic substances [flowing] straight into the bay”(Flannery, 2015).

Port Phillip Bay is not the only body of water in Melbourne that is subject to heavy pollution. The Yarra River is also teeming with toxicants despite being cleaner today than in previous decades. Unfortunately, “raw sewage is still pouring into the river during heavy rains...[and] numerous examples of over-development on the river’s banks...that [are] reducing water quality” and more housing developments along the Yarra are slated to turn one third of a 16-hectare grasslands into *more* impervious surface(Lucas, 2015). As I have previously discussed, greater areas of impervious surface result in greater levels of water pollution.

While Melbourne may be marketed as ‘sustainable’ it is obvious that a large portion of their citizens and governing bodies could still benefit from viewing environmental art. The experience of viewing these works would likely reiterate the importance of sustainable practices to Melbourne citizens and employees, especially in regards to water pollution. In the right circumstances, art can affect change on an individual level as well as on community and political levels. However, something must be done from the top down to control pollutants that individual actions cannot account for alone. Melbourne government must establish marine

reserve locations in Port Phillip Bay, increase vegetation and decrease infrastructure surrounding the Bay, and install reed beds to filter stormwater (Flannery, 2015). However, personal action can help solve this problem as well. Examples include: washing cars on grassy areas, using chemical collection services when changing oil in cars, composting leaf litter instead of throwing it out, washing paintbrushes in garden troughs rather than sinks, picking up dog waste, abstaining from using weed killers and fertilizers before periods of rain or wind, landscaping with native plants which require less fertilizer, sweeping footpaths and composting/binning waste rather than hosing it down, building raingardens that filter stormwater runoff, purchasing less plastics, and binning or recycling all plastic waste (Yarra & Bay, 2016, para. 6).

Environmental art, for many of the reasons that I have established, appears to be viable and valuable option in fighting water pollution in Melbourne. Without influential visual aids, inspiring Melbourne citizens to petition for governmental initiatives or change personal behavior may prove more difficult. My creative work and the existing environmental art in Melbourne joins this fight alongside many other Melbourne initiatives.

1.7 Existing Melbourne initiatives

While the problem of water pollution in Melbourne remains pertinent and outstanding, a substantial fraction of individuals are fighting to diminish its environmental repercussions. In 2008, a handful of protest ships sailed to meet a large dredging vessel (named Queen of the Netherlands) at Port Phillip Heads in an effort to increase public awareness that channel deepening in Port Phillip poses danger to aquatic ecosystems (Protest buzz as Queen steams in, 2008, p. 1-2). These protestors bravely stood up against dredging, and even though they knew their gesture would not stop the vessel from undertaking its project, they still believed in the power of activism to create *some* level of positive change (Protest buzz as Queen steams in, 2008, p. 1-2).

Activism against water pollution and ecosystem destruction in Port Phillip Bay has been an ongoing effort; unquestionably, there are Melbourne citizens who are aware of the problems and care enough to take action. In 2015, the Yarra Riverkeeper Association and Environmental Justice Australia (a not-for-profit environmental group) held a forum on the banks of the Yarra River in order to pressure the Andrews government into honoring their promise of introducing

new measures to protect the Yarra. (Lucas, 2015). It is likely that many *future activists* are currently unaware of the severity of environmental degradation in their area. If this is true, then there is a massive pool of potential environmentalist allies waiting to be awakened through various educational appeals, such as environmental art.

There are also a large number of organizations fighting against water pollution in Melbourne and the greater Victoria area. For example, the Yarra Riverkeeper Association works to protect and restore the Yarra River and its tributaries (Yarra & Bay, 2016). Waterwatch is a community program that engages local communities with issues of river health and water management (Yarra & Bay, 2016). The Port Phillip Eco Centre is an environmental group that promotes sustainability and community-based environmental action (Yarra & Bay, 2016). Larger organizations like the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) Victoria and Environment Victoria are also involved with water pollution problems. Among these many organizations and groups, there are also several informational websites that give tips on how Melbourne citizens can battle water pollution.

The present effort to eradicate water pollution in the Melbourne area is impressive but not yet broad enough to yield a a solution. While I certainly did not spearhead the water pollution initiative in Melbourne with my environmental painting, I was confident that its production was still entirely necessary.

2. Methods & Ethics

I conducted my project in the city of Melbourne, Australia. This project consisted of undertaking background research, creating an environmentalist painting, displaying the painting, and collecting observations during display. The medium I chose was water-mixable oil paint, for reasons I have described in the Introduction. I produced the painting itself in an apartment in St. Kilda, a suburb of Melbourne. I also displayed the painting in St. Kilda, on a boardwalk that parallels a portion of St. Kilda Beach. St. Kilda is a popular attraction for backpackers, general travelers, and Melbourne citizens. The beachfront portion of this suburb is home to many shops, restaurants, and bars. The shores of St. Kilda Beach meet Port Phillip Bay, which accepts all of Melbourne's stormwater during periods of rain and is heavily polluted for this reason.

2.1 Research

In order to complete this project, I conducted extensive online research concerning the following topics: the history of art and the environment, art's relationship to social change (namely the environmental movement), contemporary Australian environmental artists, the severity and causes of water pollution in Melbourne, and other Melbourne initiatives fighting water pollution. Initially, I began this background research in mid-to-late October in Byron Bay, Australia. However, most of this research took place throughout the first week of November, 2016 in Kensington (a different Melbourne suburb).

Additionally, I visited the National Gallery of Victoria on November 2nd, as well as the Ian Potter Centre in Federation Square on November 4th, in order to see renowned Australian artwork and seek out environmentally focused pieces.

After my arrival in St. Kilda on November 6th, I conducted two phone interviews with Australian environmental artists John Dahlsen (November 7th) and Debbie Symons (November

11th). I chose to interview John Dahlsen because he is an experienced environmental artist who works in many mediums, and he is highly esteemed in the environmental art world. I chose to interview Debbie Symons because she was involved with an important environmental art festival that I researched, and because her work brilliantly combines scientific data and visual arts. Before these interviews began, I obtained informed consent from both of my interviewees. I described to them the nature of my project, and asked them if their interviews could be used in my final report, which I told them would be read by several of my professors (but not published). After they agreed, I asked them if it was ok for me to use their names in my paper, and both artists agreed to be named.

Other research that I conducted *before* beginning painting included observation of the St. Kilda Beach area via sketching and taking photographs which I later used to inform the creation of my painting. I wanted to ensure that the environment in my painting would be applicable to the environment in St. Kilda, and these observations helped me achieve this effect. I also found other reference photos on the internet that I used to vaguely inform my figures, as art models were unavailable. I also used my own body as reference. To paint the garbage in my piece, I sometimes referred to plastic and glass objects that were in my apartment. You can find photos of my completed painting in Appendix A: Photos of the Creative Work.

2.2 Process of painting & display

I commenced painting on November 9th and completed the work on November 19th, 2016. I began the painting by creating a large sketch across my canvas which set up the preliminary composition. I then painted the most important objects that would anchor the scene, such as the main tree and main figures. Next, I painted the larger areas of white space (the water, the 'sand', and other large structures) which allowed me to better visualize how the painting would come together and how the colors I chose would read within the composition. From here, I alternated between covering blank spaces of the composition and working on details. Throughout, I maintained intense focus on my color choice, the textures I produced, and the overall cohesiveness of my work. Before and after a period of painting, I would stand back and observe the work, meditating on what I wanted to change or what I envisioned moving forward.

I prepared for public display by taking notes on pertinent information regarding water

pollution that I could supply to viewers in the event that someone asked me a question. I hired an easel from Eckersley's Art Supply so that my painting would be secure, visible, and displayed at the appropriate height on the boardwalk. I created an information board that included several websites that viewers could utilize for more information or if they wanted to volunteer time or money to the cause. I secured this board against my easel underneath my painting during display.

On the days of display, November 19th and 20th 2016, I conducted rigorous observations of viewership response to my painting as well as accounts of conversations between me and my audience. For all of the conversational accounts I describe in the *Analysis and Evaluation of the Creative Work* section, I obtained verbal informed consent to use the conversational accounts in my paper. I did so by explaining my project to the viewer, asking them if I could use information from our conversation in my written report for the project, and assuring them that their names would not be used (as I did not find it necessary to include them). I informed them that several of my professors would read my paper, but that it would not be published. I made these observations in order to determine how my painting was received, whether or not it was understood, and whether or not it could be used as a tool to provoke positive changes in personal environmental actions.

2.3 Ethics of my study

Before I continued past the preliminary stages of this project, I submitted an ethics form to the LBR (Local Review Board) and secured approval for my project without special conditions.

Because I obtained informed consent from all of the subjects who I spoke with during interviews or display, I did not run into any ethical concerns throughout my data collection. Additionally, I made a conscious and vehement effort to be friendly and sensitive towards all of the human subjects I encountered.

However, one ethical concern I encountered during my project was how to properly dispose of waste water and waste materials while working with oil paints. Water-mixable oils do not require the use of toxic chemical solvents, such as turpentine or other paint thinners, but the paints are still toxic. One can ethically dispose of solid, fully dried oil paint waste in the bin,

which is where I deposited the paint rag and palette that I used. I used only a small amount of rinse water while painting and ended up with even less after evaporation. As I was unable to properly dispose of this wastewater at a recycling facility before leaving Melbourne, I transported the water with me in order to properly and ethically dispose of it at a later time. Additionally, I made sure to purchase brushes that were synthetic and not produced from animal hair.

Another ethical concern I encountered was my failure to purchase local art supplies, as well as purchasing supplies from the chain Eckersley's Art & Craft. While I did not find any data stating that Eckersley's is an unethical company, they do sell many imported products. The long-distance transport of commercial goods involves burning large amounts of fossil fuels, and all of Eckersley's 25 locations are responsible for supporting this negative behavior.

However, because my finances were severely limited throughout this project, I was forced to shop at the cheapest art supplies store I could find. Based on internet research, Eckersley's seemed like the cheapest option, especially since the chain provides a student discount. I did visit one other store in person that was locally owned, but it simply sold the same products at a higher price. Although the paints that I purchased were produced in France, I do not believe that there were many easily-accessible and cost effective locally-produced options for me to choose from.

However, throughout the process of creating this painting, I have gained valuable experience in creating environmental art that I can further utilize when I have access to more sustainable art supplies. I also hope that my painting's educational value and public promotion of sustainability can help to offset the environmental costs of the materials I had to use. Additionally, I hope to further offset these environmental costs by re-using my painting to promote sustainability in other areas that suffer from similar environmental afflictions.

3. Description and Explanation of the Creative Work

3.1 Compositional strategies

The painting is a landscape beach scene containing five figures. The work is three feet in height and four feet in width. I intended that the painting be somewhat of a dreamscape as well as a beachscape; my goal was to combine an uncomfortable, humorous, mysterious visual with a clear message. Within the painting, I incorporated strong diagonal lines that direct the viewer's gaze with purpose. These angles draw the eye to some of the most important messages in the painting; for example, the diagonals in the water draw the eye from a pile of trash in the lower left corner, past nurdles and a floating water bottle, and towards the thought bubbles in the upper right corner of my painting. These thought bubbles are also the only element of the painting that is white, which also makes an eye-catching resting point.

I positioned the figures so that they reinforce the diagonals of the water, working to further enhance the viewing pathway that carries the eye throughout the entire composition. The positioning of the figures into two 'rows' that parallel the diagonal of the shore intentionally directs the eye so that the viewer absorbs most of the important elements of the painting within a short few seconds. Because the elbows of the two large main figures in the painting function as 'arrows' pointing towards the thought bubbles above them, they reinforce the viewing pathway even further.

3. 2 Sustainability concepts and messages

The thought bubbles themselves, where the eye tends to temporarily rest before moving left in the composition, incorporate irony into the painting. I planned for the thought bubbles to make the painting more approachable and humorous, but also strange and thought-provoking. The text within the bubbles ("This will be delicious!" which corresponds to a man catching a piece of garbage on his fishing pole, and "Wow...that one is beautiful," which corresponds to a woman finding a piece of garbage on the shore) also makes the main concept of the painting explicitly clear--the figures are entirely oblivious to the pollution and destruction happening around them. These characters are seemingly brainwashed into believing that they are enjoying a normal, beautiful day at the beach. Each figure is either turned away from the viewer, wearing sunglasses, or has his or her eyes closed; here, I explicitly convey the figure's 'blindness' towards the problems surrounding them.

While rendering the main female figure, I collected inspiration from renaissance works, which often include figures poised in interesting, graceful positions. Within the context of my painting, a graceful pose visually conflicts with the rest of the environment rather than appearing appropriate and cohesive. The blatantly visible disconnect between the figures and their environment provokes reflection on personal behaviors and thought patterns. I hoped that the viewer would discern these disparities and consider whether or not they embody the same naivety as the figures, who are happy to be interacting with garbage rather than the natural environment. The painting asks the viewer: how much do you really know about your environment? My piece prompts viewers to compare the detached environmental interactions occurring within my painting to similar interactions on St. Kilda Beach or in their own lives. Realizing this allegory may conceivably lead to sustainable changes in behavior. Clearly, nobody wants to feel comparable to individuals so unaware of environmental problems that they are happily hunting for the most beautiful beached garbage. While humorous, the oblivion of the figures in the painting is not admirable. When the viewer realizes that the behavior demonstrated in the painting is undesirable, they are encouraged to alter their own behavior in order to avoid completely disregarding environmental destructions.

Color also plays a meaningful role in the piece. I purposefully created a distinct contrast between the color of the figures and the partially monochromatic background in order to create a visual division between the figures and their landscape. The bright, colorful palette of the figures also reiterates the idea that the figures are basking in the wonder of their environment, full of vitality and life, completely unaffected by their surroundings. The palette I chose for the figures also contributes to their beauty, making them interesting and inviting.

I attentively included as much beauty into the piece as possible, although it depicts a desolate and degraded landscape. This decision was heavily inspired by an interview I had with environmental artist John Dahlsen, which I recount in one of the following sections. The element of beauty in my painting serves as a symbol of what is at risk. It represents all of the beauty that we might lose if our environment is not protected and restored through collective and widespread action. The environment in the painting, while aesthetically pleasing, is also noticeably undesirable and dingy. Therefore, it also exemplifies the type of environment that might replace the natural beauty we constantly jeopardize.

Additionally, the scale and perspective of the painting, which is purposefully inaccurate, produces a visual representation of the justified confusion that one might experience while observing people interacting so happily with a polluted landscape. The varying sizes of the figures, which do not correspond to the proportions of the environment, somehow appear cohesive within the context of my painting. The scale and perspective applied in the painting also allows for all important elements of the painting to be large enough for easy viewing. This brief experience of confusion is meant to intrigue the viewer before it is replaced by contemplation and insight.

Texture has always been an important element of my painting style; the smooth, blended, uniform textures I applied to this painting combine to create a sort of ‘plastic dreamworld’. I intended that the painting appear smooth and neat. I wanted all elements of my composition to have the same texture that I applied to the trash in the painting so that there would be a uniform sense of unnaturalness pervading the entire work. Essentially, the environment itself has embodied a sense of artificiality. Hopefully, the viewer is uncomfortable seeing this artificial world and is motivated to do something to prevent its reality. I also included skyscrapers in the distant ground of my composition as a reminder of the metropolitan setting of the environment. These skyscrapers, as well as the majority of the upper fourth of the composition, are painted in different shades of gray. This makes the major source of water pollution, the city of Melbourne, seem cold and artificial. These color choices also contribute to the overall dinginess of the urban landscape.

While rendering the trash, I was careful to be neat rather than create chaotic pockets of garbage. These ‘portraits’ of garbage are meant to call into question what we find valuable as a society. The trash was deserving of attention and detail while I was painting because it represents what we pay attention to as a society: material possession, convenience, and consumerism. The idea to apply an element of portraiture to the garbage in my painting initially developed from an experience I had while visiting the National Gallery of Victoria. I spent a few minutes observing *Evian and Rubbish* by David Jolly, noting the artist’s painstakingly detailed treatment of garbage, something society views as unsightly or even repulsive. I recognized that the confusion I felt towards this painting was a valuable tool, as it quickly incited reflection regarding our cultural values as consumers. I wanted to harness the same effect within my painting.

Within the painting itself, there are overt references to several water pollution concerns in Port Phillip Bay. I reference the overabundance of algae in the bay due to eutrophication by rendering the water in muted, unattractive shades of green-brown and blue-green. I represented microplastics by including small plastic spheres in the water and around the shore. I also painted larger plastic garbage, which is the original source of these plastic nurdles. All of these issues closely relate to the overarching issue of toxic stormwater runoff. In these ways, the sustainability message is educational and straightforward.

3.3 Informing my work: observation and interview

In order to inform my work, I first walked around St. Kilda and made an observational sketch of St. Kilda Beach. I used this exercise to connect with my study location through observation and gauge my initial visual interpretations of the scene. Next, I walked around the area and took reference photos of garbage and bins, from which I also created some additional initial sketches. At this point, I created a sketch of a preliminary composition for my painting. Using this sketch as a basis, I continued to take reference photos of the area. I gathered these photos based on the composition that I had envisioned, taking photos of trees that would suit my concept, as well as photos of the water, sand, and buildings surrounding the beach. I used these photos casually, extracting their essence and re-interpreting them creatively. I also collected a variety of reference photos that were available on the internet, many of which I used as a preliminary basis for the poses of my figures, or simply to make sure my proportions were correct.

In addition to observing the St. Kilda area, conducting research on relevant local pollution problems, collecting reference photos and producing sketches, I also interviewed two Australian environmental artists, John Dahlsen and Debbie Symons. I inquired about their personal experiences with combining art and environmentalism in Australia. The list of questions that I asked and the raw data from the interviews can be found in Appendix C: Interview Questions. The questions vary slightly between the two interviews.

3.3.1 John Dahlsen Interview

John Dahlsen is a well-decorated contemporary environmental artist based in Byron Bay whose diverse body of work includes recycled art, environmental landscape and seascapes, installation art, and abstract drawing and painting. Speaking with Dahlsen proved very valuable in stimulating creative thought about my own work, as well as learning more about the how experienced environmental artists view the craft.

Initially, I was curious to hear about Dahlsen's experience in combining environmentalism and painting, as I was about to undertake my own environmental painting. When I questioned him about which medium he believed to be most effective in the sphere of environmental art, Dahlsen challenged the assumption that one medium is superior. Instead of comparing and contrasting various mediums, Dahlsen delved into what he believed to be a universally important aspect of all environmental art: the notion of beauty. He believes that a work of art must go through the required 'alchemy' in order to be called art. Regardless of which medium an artist utilizes, the artist will achieve some level of success by incorporating the notion of beauty. Dahlsen, an experienced pioneer in the medium of found plastics, has undertaken these projects with a commitment to create something of beauty. He is working against the mindset that rubbish and trash is what everybody terms as 'ugly.' Instead, he brings a level of alchemy to these waste materials and transforms them into something attractive, securing their rightful position in contemporary visual arts aesthetics. Dahlsen believes that this framework can guide most any work of art to a reasonably successful completion, regardless of medium.

The initial concept for my painting was to develop contrast between my figures and the natural environment through varying texture, thus creating a chaotic environment juxtaposed with peaceful figures. When Dahlsen discussed the importance of beauty in environmental art, I understood that while chaos can be considered beautiful, a more polished work might have a greater visual impact on the viewer (as well as better suiting my existing painting style).

I later asked Dahlsen to speak about how effective he believes art can be in provoking action from its viewers, a question that guided much of my initial research for this project. Dahlsen responded that while he does "believe that [art] has the capacity to change things; [he is] a realist. [He] doesn't believe it is as effective as [other campaigns]," like Clean Up Australia. However, he does not believe that environmental art is meant to be as effective as these campaigns, because it is a more subtle effort. He stated that "art gets reasonably limited airplay, but it is having its effect," continuing on to surmise that environmental art likely encourages

viewers to contribute to anti-litter campaigns or donate to good environmental causes. The main benefit of environmental art, according to Dahlsen, is that it “helps people to see in different ways, and this is the most important thing.” Art, to Dahlsen, is all about the psychology of perception and how to have people see the world in different ways. Art also reaches a different audience than do normal environmental crusaders, delivering a message in a more sophisticated way than ‘finger pointing’.

This exchange helped to inform the creation of my personal piece because it provided, in essence, an affirmation of the situation that I assumed I would enter when making my own environmental art. While art is not the panacea to environmental problems, it is useful in reaching new people with appeals that are unique and not found in any other campaigns. Talking to Dahlsen helped me feel more confident that I was taking a sophisticated path in conveying positive environmental messages. The interview also supported my decision to keep my painting from being too gloomy or casting too much blame (this had been a consideration of mine since deciding to embark on a creative project).

Later in our conversation, I asked Dahlsen if he believes a specific target audience benefits most from environmental art. He responded that he would not want to limit the success of environmental art to its effects on any one demographic. Instead, he stated that the general public is having a very interesting time looking at environmental art, as they are able to see creative applications to problems normally seen as entirely negative. This appeal of environmental art engages a broad audience, especially because environmental art does not approach its viewers in a forceful or aggressive way. ‘Gloom and doom’ is the most obvious way of dealing with these issues, which Dahlsen does not support.

At the time of this interview, I did not know who would happen to view my painting while I displayed it at the St. Kilda boardwalk. Hearing that the Australian public enjoys engaging in environmental art was even greater motivation to create an approachable piece for people to enjoy during my display.

3.3.2 Debbie Symons Interview

My second interviewee Debbie Symons is an Australian environmental artist who “utilises environmental data to investigate and interrogate the inextricable links between

environmental degradation and free market capitalism; exploring humankind's ecological conundrum"(Debbie Symons About, 2016) in compelling works of art that have been featured in many international and domestic galleries.

When asked a question regarding which artistic medium is best suited for environmental art, Symons did not give a definite answer. She did, however, recount her personal transformation as an artist; she started as a painter in her initial practice, but personally found that the message that she was trying to communicate was not getting through to the audience using this medium. Namely, it was difficult for her to incorporate data sets into her work using painting. She found this easier to accomplish after transitioning to digital art. However, she is currently working on a large-scale drawing linking Earth Summit conferences to subsequent endangered species extinctions. She wants to exemplify the immensity of this problem in a massive drawing; therefore, her medium depends on what she is depicting.

Speaking with an environmental artist who combines data sets and art was very exciting, as a portion of my background research deals with the comparison of 'data vs. art'. In Symon's work, she demonstrates that the two are not mutually exclusive. From Symon's discussion regarding her transition away from painting and current endeavor with drawing, I was deeply inspired to attempt the largest possible work that I could soundly complete in the given time period. When choosing between two canvas sizes in the art supplies store, I was reminded of this conversation and purchased the larger size. To me, it makes sense that the scale of a painting or drawing should represent the immensity of the problem it describes. I believe that large-scale paintings are more striking, intriguing, and capable of asserting their messages. In fact, I wish that my painting could have been larger.

My experience as an art consumer has always involved detailed examination and analysis of the artist's message. However, during my interview with Debbie Symons, she quickly answered that she believes 'clear communication' leads to successful environmental artwork. Many of her favorite artists produce work so clear that its concept is unmistakable. I found this sentiment very inspiring; why make a viewer guess what your message is? Considering that my display was slated to take place on a boardwalk (where many people would be quickly passing by), this recommendation of powerful simplicity and conceptual clarity deeply resonated with me.

When I questioned Symons regarding the efficacy of environmental art in her experience, she responded that art can effectively communicate to peoples hearts and minds in order to create another layer of understanding that would not be possible with data alone. One of her works from 2009 entitled *World Species Market* received great feedback from its viewers, many of whom had no idea about the number of endangered species in Australia. Symons cited this as an example of art's ability to create a new level of understanding of what science is already telling us. These experiences support her belief that art can have a huge voice in the environmental argument. She witnessed this potential firsthand while participating in CIMARTE's ART + CLIMATE = CHANGE festival in 2015. She described this environmental art festival as an exciting educational tool that attracted a large number of non-artists (75,000 total viewers). Symon's experiences seeing art transform scientific data into something more personal concurs with much of the research that I conducted for this project.

Later in our conversation, I asked Symons why she believes that there has been such an explosion in environmental art recently. Symons quickly countered the assumption that environmental art is a recent phenomenon. She referenced early romantic paintings and landscapes produced during industrialization, concluding that artists have been talking about what has been happening in their local environments for a long time. This response reminded me of the fundamental argument of my entire endeavor: art and the environment have effectively been conjoined for centuries. Given the nature of my background research, I was both pleased with this answer and mildly frustrated that I did not predict it; however, it was wonderful to experience solidarity with another artist who understands the co-evolution of art and societal concerns. Symons believes that art explicitly relating to the modern environmentalist movement, however, has simply grown from the severity and importance of the issue.

Symons also discussed that instead of making art for a specific target audience, she lets her emotions guide her creativity. In the case of her current drawing project, sheer frustration was the motivating force. This exchange was valuable, and restated advice that I had also received from my advisor, Madeleine Faught: let your passion for the environmental cause motivate your artistic vision.

3. 4 Approach to public display

With the permission of Georgia Rouette of the Port Phillip City Council, I arranged to display my painting along the St. Kilda beachfront boardwalk for several hours on Saturday, November 19th and again on Sunday, November 20th. Therefore, my intended audience included Melbourne beach-goers, St. Kilda residents, and anyone else visiting St. Kilda Beach on these days. The boardwalk is consistently and reasonably crowded on most afternoons and especially on weekends, so choosing to show my painting on two weekend afternoons was intentional. I was expecting that a large number of people would potentially observe my painting to some extent. I also knew that my audience would consist of individuals of all ages and many demographics. Therefore, I made the painting clean, crisp, and large so that viewers could absorb information in passing or from a greater distance than if my painting was smaller or more complicated in composition. The shapes in my painting are clearly defined, and I have chosen to use linear contours to outline focal points in the piece (such as the figures, garbage, water, and thought bubbles), which allows for easy examination of the piece from a crowded boardwalk. I chose to add thought bubbles containing ironic sentences in order for the painting to be palatable for people of all ages, as visiting the beach is often a family affair. Additionally, I planned the size and location of these bubbles so that individuals passing on the boardwalk might be able to quickly read the text and observe the corresponding actions of the figures to whom the thought bubbles belong. This is an easy way to promptly convey a simple message to people walking past, or to peak someone's interest and provoke deeper observation. Generally, I aimed to make the painting as attention-grabbing as possible through the use of color contrasts and large focal points within an already large painting.

After having shown my painting at St. Kilda Beach, I believe my painting still holds valuable display potential. While the sustainability messages in the painting are easily applicable to Melbourne and St. Kilda Beach (especially given my display location), there is nothing that *explicitly* references that the urban landscape in my painting is that of Melbourne, Australia. While water pollution problems in Melbourne are vast and critical, many of the issues are not unique to Port Phillip Bay. Other cities struggle with plastics pollution, eutrophication, plastic nurdles, and toxic stormwater runoff. Therefore, this painting can be successfully repurposed to supplement anti-pollution efforts in other cities struggling with similar issues. I believe that this makes the painting dynamic and valuable; in the future, while I dedicate my time and efforts to other pieces of environmental art or other avenues of activism, this piece can continue to provoke

reflection and spark conversation in new areas. Perhaps the painting could be displayed again in a gallery, as part of a relevant art festival, at an environmental conference, or even at direct action campsites.

4. Analysis and Evaluation of the Creative Work

4.1 Clarity and efficacy of sustainability messages

I believe the aesthetics of my creative work, while lacking specific *data* about the issues that I represent, are effective in delivering an important message. Without requiring extensive scrutiny, the painting quickly reminds people of pollution as a general issue. Upon minimal investigation, I believe that the disconnect between the figures in my painting and their surrounding environment is extremely clear and easily detectable. This separation is arguably the most effective component in delivering the painting's sustainability messages. In order to *completely* absorb my message during a boardwalk display, I think viewers would need to either have a short conversation with me or make a connection between my painting and the websites I provided. If the painting were hanging in a gallery, I think a standard informational plaque with a short blurb would allow the viewer to fully internalize the sustainability concepts.

However, I do believe that the main messages can be fully discerned upon observation alone. For adults, even reading the thought bubbles could be enough to provoke internal questioning about personal environmental habits. While I cannot confidently assert that audiences unfamiliar with art could easily ascertain the messages in my painting, I believe that the main message is uncomplicated: naivety towards prevalent environmental issues will lead to greater destruction. However, since part of the viewing experience relies on the bewilderment and potential distress that this unusual visual may provoke, it is possible that a spectator must work through these reactions first in order to internalize my message secondarily.

Children may need assistance to discern my specific messages, but I believe the color scheme and composition I employ in the painting is interesting to younger individuals.

Furthermore, children seldom observe art without an accompanying adult who can explain the work to them.

With respect to how motivating the messages are, I believe that they are firstly educational. The painting serves as a reminder of problems that are often glossed over or forgotten. Increased awareness could lead to sustainable actions, such as donating to environmental campaigns, even if it fails to bring about lifestyle changes. Beyond acting as a simple reminder of the issue of pollution, however, my painting appeals to one's emotions and provokes deeper contemplation than if I were raising awareness for pollution *without* using art. Because the underlying messages of my painting are delivered in a visually engaging manner, I believe that they could provoke changes in personal behavior. The painting focuses on human behavior within a natural environment, prompting a comparison between the viewer's environmental attitudes and the unacceptable attitudes of the figures in the painting. I believe that this interaction has the potential to be transformative for the viewer. Many people change their behaviors in order to feel like they are 'doing the right thing.' Without casting blame, my painting asserts that many common environmental behaviors simply do not fit this criteria. As I will describe in a following section, I saw at least *some* clear evidence during my display that viewing this piece could prompt legitimate action.

4.2 Possible improvements

4.2.1 Creative work

There are several alterations I could have made in the painting itself that may have made my message more effective or even clearer. If I were to re-paint my work given the same amount of time, I would have refined the oscillating patterns that I included in the water and on the tree. I would have created these patterns by following the existing contours of the compositional elements, which could have made parts of the environment appear more plastic-like than they do in the current picture. This could have intensified the negative emotional response to observing the natural world in an artificial state. A greater emotional response could have been more motivating.

Providing that the addition of more garbage would not have cluttered my composition, I would have painted more of it. While the garbage in my painting is a prevalent focal point, perhaps the basis of my painting would have been even more obvious to passing onlookers if the pollution *really* ‘jumped out’ at them. In order to incorporate other sustainability messages into my work, I could have branded some of the garbage in my painting. This would have given a clear indication of which Melbourne products or companies are most problematic and therefore should be avoided. While this might have sacrificed the painting’s potential for re-use outside of Melbourne, alerting people to specific products that cause environmental destruction can cultivate environmentally positive spending habits. I could have also included a message about the negative effects of Melbourne water pollution on local animals. While I think my painting benefits from a balanced composition that is full but not overwhelming, somehow incorporating wildlife might have created a more influential piece for certain viewers.

4.2.2 *Display*

Regarding my display, there are several improvements that I considered in hindsight. Firstly, the informational board that I displayed alongside my painting on November 19th did not meet my standards. The board offered three valuable websites. These sites included positive personal actions that fight water pollution as well as relevant organizations that accept donations or volunteers. However, the board itself suffered from execution errors which were rectified before the second display day. The first board was too small and not a focal point; it was simply not as inviting as I had hoped it could be. The second day, I improved the board by making it larger, and incorporating an inviting message to viewers reading “Ask me about my painting!” in large capital letters. The board was more eye catching, and also included brief, general descriptions of each of the sites. You can see a photo of this information board alongside my painting in Appendix A: Photos of the Creative Work. If I were to do this project again, I would have arranged for the second information board to be used on both days.

I believe that this board was important to my display because its information helped provide context for the painting. Additionally, the sites held potential value depending on if the viewers would utilize them.

In addition to this information board, I considered whether or not handing out flyers could have been more effective in reaching more people with information. However, handing out a large number of paper flyers entails a potential negative environmental impact. I would have hated to see the flyers littered, especially while I was displaying artwork in order to fight pollution. While flyers could have delivered sustainability information and resources to more people, it is possible that this information could have been received entirely separate from my painting. There would be no guarantee that people receiving the flyers in passing would observe my painting more closely. I believe that those who were truly interested in the work either observed it for a long enough period to absorb the message, or they approached me and I was able to verbally provide information and encourage them to visit the websites I supplied. Flyers could have spread valuable resources to a larger number of people, but it is likely that many of these individuals would not have benefitted from close observation of my painting, which is an important method for internalizing the issue and facilitating reflection. This, after all, is the whole purpose of environmental art. However, perhaps more people would have come up and observed my painting after receiving a flyer; this is possible but not certain, as many people were en route to a destination or talking in groups.

To prepare for display, I collected information about the causes of Melbourne water pollution and personal actions that people can take to fight water pollution. I wanted to be sure that I could accurately and quickly answer any questions from my audience. After my display had finished, I considered whether or not it would have been more effective to provide some of this information in a written form alongside my painting. While including a large amount of written information next to the painting could have distracted from the visual or dissuaded people from reading the boards, I believe that providing this information could have positively affected viewers who were too shy to have a conversation with me.

As a display location, a boardwalk has inherent limitations. After all, it is a *boardwalk*; because it is a footpath, my potential viewers were continuously moving. Although many people experienced my painting in passing, they observed it in an environment where the message could be easily related to their surroundings. Additionally, I was able to reach a large and diverse audience in a short span of time. More likely than not, this audience included individuals who were not art consumers. Therefore, I assume that individuals who would never seek out environmental art were able to experience it to some degree. While those attending an art gallery

may be more invested in closely examining the works and discerning their deeper meanings, displaying in a gallery may sometimes limit an audience to pre-existing art consumers. While I'm sure that some of my viewers were not interested in art, I think that many people who may lack artistic inclination can still connect with art upon observation.

Unfortunately, I did observe that my presence alongside the painting intimidated or dissuaded some viewers from closely observing the piece. An artist sitting next to his work could be a reasonable deterrent for shy people who are interested in art but not in conversation. For these certain observers, I believe a gallery display would be superior and allow for more private examination.

Lastly, If I were to re-do this display effort, I would have sooner occupied the location that I used on the second day of display. The location that I used on the second day was very near to the location from day one, but it was slightly closer to the foot traffic which I believe prompted more conversations.

4.3 Observed reactions and conversational accounts with viewers

I will now describe my experience displaying on the St. Kilda beachfront boardwalk in relation to my previous analysis of my work and display. This information consists of observations of reactions to my painting as well as descriptions of conversational interactions between my audience and myself.

Day one: I displayed my work from 3pm-6pm on Saturday, November 19th 2016.

Observed reactions from viewers: Initially, I observed many people looking at my painting in passing. There were few individuals who passed by my easel without so much as a glance towards my painting. These types of interactions with my painting, which were very common, possibly served to raise awareness of pollution in St. Kilda. I also observed many people looking at my painting for an extended period of time from afar. I believe these more extended interactions could have allowed the viewer to make connections between what they were seeing in the painting and what was happening around them. This would have been a more thought-provoking viewing experience than simply looking at the painting for several seconds

while walking past it. I also observed many double-takes from onlookers. This reaction pleased me, as I believe this was an indication that my painting is visually salient. I also witnessed several people speaking to their friends while looking at the painting. This indicated that they could have been discussing its purpose.

When I noticed someone taking an interest in the painting, I tried to be inviting by saying smiling and saying hello. However, I found that many people on the boardwalk were too busy conversing with friends or were walking too quickly to have a conversation with me. I asked a couple of people who seemed interested in the painting if they had a minute to speak with me about it, but they did not. I witnessed one person who was observing from an intermediate distance pull out her phone and (assumedly) copy down something from my information board.

Out of a large number of passive interactions with my painting, I was most pleased to see that a variety of individuals carefully observed my painting. These individuals may have absorbed some of the sustainability messages that I have previously discussed.

Interactions with viewers: I had several interactions with people in passing that did not lead to a conversation, but which alerted me to the fact that people were taking legitimate interest in my painting. As people passed by my painting, three different individuals told me they thought the painting was beautiful or that they liked it in general. Witnessing people connecting to the beauty in my painting was validating, as the pleasurable experience of viewing art creates a platform for art to deliver its message.

One man did approach me for a conversation. He started by telling me that he admired my art, and I was able to explain my project to him. Using my painting as a reference, I explained the issues of microplastics and eutrophication to him. He had never heard about these issues before. He seemed interested and wished me luck on my project before leaving. Because knowledge guides behavior, I believe it is possible that this interaction could have lead to improved environmental consciousness.

Day two: I displayed my work from 1pm-4:30pm on Sunday, November 20th 2016.

Observed reactions from viewers: Similar to the previous display effort, I noticed many people looking at the painting as they walked by, including some people who slowed down in

order to observe the work in more detail. Again, there were many viewers at an intermediate distance who seemed comfortable staring at my painting for longer periods of time as they stood or strolled past. I could only assume that these people were contemplating the message I was presenting. I observed a woman point the painting out to her friend. Interestingly, I also noticed a woman give a confused frown towards my painting as she walked by, as if she was upset or taken aback by it. This reaction, although negative, was important for me to witness. It served as a confirmation that my painting was provocative and capable of eliciting an emotional reaction. Negative feelings are often highly motivating.

I also observed another woman giggle as she passed my painting. Although the painting represents serious environmental issues, I still find humor in its aesthetic, especially at a quick glance. Hopefully, this element of humor can make the messages more approachable and less intimidating. I also witnessed many people reading my informational board in passing. I heard somebody turn to his friend and say “a person resting in trash?!” in a surprised voice. It was interesting and exciting to see that my painting was challenging some of its viewers by presenting an unusual or uncomfortable interaction between humans and pollution.

Another woman passed by and let out a sad “Ah,” as if to recognize the environmental concerns that I was expressing in knowledgeable solidarity. Although I was not displaying at a gallery, it seemed that many people were pleased to see art as they walked by, evidenced by several people smiling at me or giving me a thumbs up. The main point of combining art and social change is that people enjoy looking at visual illustrations. Art draws attention, which gives it power to deliver a message.

Another observation from this day included a father pointing the painting out to his children, assumedly because he thought that they would like to look at it too. I ended this display knowing that a very large number of people had seen my painting for a long enough period of time to at least partially discern the message behind the piece.

By the end of the day, a *very* large number of people had observed my painting for longer periods than just in passing.

Interactions with viewers: After seeing my informational board that included a prominent message reading “ask me about my painting!,” a man approached me and we had a conversation. I explained to him the nature of my project, and asked him how much he knew about pollution in Port Phillip Bay, to which he responded that he only knew that it *is* polluted and not much else. I

was then able to explain to him several of the Bay's general pollution problems (stormwater runoff, plastics) and encourage him to visit the websites on my info board, but he did not seem very invested in doing so. However, I can assume that he would have never pursued additional information about water pollution in Port Phillip Bay without seeing my painting, as he knew *of* the problem but had not looked into *why* it exists. He said that I was a good artist and wished me luck.

I talked with another man who was very friendly and interested in my painting. I explained the issues of microplastics and toxic stormwater runoff to him (what causes them and why they are negatively impacting the bay). He had no prior knowledge of water pollution issues in Port Phillip Bay, and was surprised by the information. He complimented my work and read my info board. I also noticed that several other people gathered around my painting to listen while we had this conversation, which was a common occurrence whenever I interacted with a viewer. Although I had prepared detailed notes of information that I could provide to my viewers, it was difficult to insert a great deal of information into these short, casual conversations.

I engaged in a third conversation, this time with a woman who approached me to ask if she could take a photo of my information board, which I encouraged. She asked me if I was selling work, and I explained the details of my project to her. She was interested to hear about the issues that I was representing in my painting; again, I explained the causes and effects of the issues I discuss in my Introduction. She asked me questions about the figures and showed that she was carefully observing the work. Her response to the information was compassionate, and she acknowledged the importance of these problems. Approximately three other people gathered around the painting during this interaction to listen and observe.

Soon after, two young women came up to me and we had a long conversation about stormwater runoff, impervious surfaces, and green buffer zones in relation to water pollution. We also discussed the dangers of microplastics, and I pointed out a website on my board that gives tips on actions we can take at home to decrease stormwater pollution. One of the two women took a photo of the information board as well as the painting; the pair seemed interested in the topics and had no previous knowledge of the issues we discussed. Here, my painting was a very successful conversation piece, leading to the spread of knowledge and resources that can facilitate positive changes in personal environmental actions.

During this interaction, a pair of men gathered to listen, and then struck up a conversation with me after the pair of women left. They told me that they liked my painting, and they laughed with me about the man lounging on the trash. This was a good indication that people were receiving my painting the way I had intended; the ludicrous behavior demonstrated in my painting was producing a strong emotional reaction. They had listened to my conversation with the previous women and were supportive of my cause.

A short while later, a man approached my painting and I again explained the project and issues of water pollution in Port Phillip Bay, including stormwater runoff due to impervious surfaces, algal overgrowth, and microplastics. He listened and was interested, but began asking me specific questions about the painting itself, as he was a self-proclaimed art fan. He interpreted the painting perfectly, saying that the people in my piece were clearly oblivious to the garbage around them and enjoying themselves, which he noted was very reminiscent of what was going on around us at the beach. This interaction was particularly exciting, because my painting functioned not only as a conversation piece, but an adroit commentary on personal environmental attitudes. The man took a photo of my information board, shook my hand, and expressed that he was very happy that I was fighting for healthier ecosystems.

The last interaction I had was with an older woman who approached me. She asked me why I was displaying my painting, and I explained. I led the conversation by pointing out similarities between my painting and the environment around us, as I had been reminded by my last interaction that realizing this connection is important and powerful. I acknowledged that while the beach we saw had pollution that was less obvious, that it was still a big problem, continuing on to mention a few of the reasons why. The woman said that she liked my idea and responded positively, but quickly moved on to catch up with her group.

It is possible that the several people who took photos of the sites that I provided alongside my painting utilized these resources to somehow make positive changes in their behaviors. The people I talked with who did not directly engage the information board, or those who listened in, could have been inspired to do more research of their own. Hopefully, others who observed my painting without engaging me in conversation also considered the similarities between the scene in my painting and the happenings on St. Kilda Beach.

Throughout display, my goal was to focus viewers on the current status of pollution in Port Phillip Bay while encouraging them to choose more sustainable behaviors. When discussing various pollution issues with my viewers, I was able to point them out in my painting. In general, I believe that using my painting as a reference during my discussions successfully combined visual and verbal education resulting in a more permanent, memorable effect.

While I believe that people who are not heavily invested in the arts can properly interpret my painting, the one viewer who offered an appropriate analysis of my work mentioned that he was a fan of art. This made me question whether or not an art-friendly demographic would be more likely to respond to my painting in the way that I had intended.

One of the most important things that I experienced during public display, however, was that nearly all of the viewers I spoke with answered that they knew little to nothing about Melbourne water pollution. It was for this reason that the interactions I had with viewers seemed to be of great importance. For any viewers who *were* aware of these issues but remained passive, it may have been motivating to see a visual representation of a world in which their passive approach has caused greater destruction. Visualizing a highly degraded environmental reality hopefully caused some viewers to adopt a deeper understanding of the widespread impact of unsustainable behaviors. While I wish that I could have provide more specific tips on sustainable behaviors to my viewers, a handful of them demonstrated great likelihood that they would visit the sites I provided where they could easily obtain this information. Although art and data are stronger when presented together, art's efficacy relies more heavily on an emotional response than the delivery of specific information. I hope that out of the many people who viewed my painting, some had an internal reaction that left a lasting impression.

5. Conclusion

Combining two of my biggest passions, studio art and environmental justice, taught me that while environmental art may not make an immediate and widespread noticeable difference, that its effect is unique and significant. While environmental art will not single handedly end our environmental problems, there is no one effort that can. Environmental art plays an important role in the environmental movement; its existence alongside scientific data and other campaigns is vital. Art has the distinct capability to generate emotional understanding of environmental issues and incite realizations that other activism simply cannot produce.

While the medium of painting has consistently fluctuated in popularity throughout art history, it has been widely applied to many social movements. As I previously assumed before launching this project, painting can in fact be applied to environmentalism. If executed correctly, this application ultimately provides an educational message that harnesses its power to

motivate change from its beautiful and captivating viewing experience. The universal qualities of art, such as emotional appeal and visual interest, are the very characteristics that give art the power to convey social messages in a significant way.

I will continue to challenge my creative capacities by making more environmental art, using this experience as a foundation. Future projects related to my own could include a performance art piece in which people act out the scenario that I created in my painting; in other words, performers could happily and positively interact with garbage and other pollutants to comment on widespread ignorance of pollution problems. Another related painting project could be a series of highly detailed garbage portraits. These paintings could creatively question the consumerist habits of western culture and comment on what we truly find beautiful--are material goods more beautiful than the natural environment that they often destroy?

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Ap
In

1. What is your personal approach in combining positive environmental themes and painting?

a. What is the most effective medium in environmental art?

-challenges the assumption that one medium is better than the other

-with creativity it is important to work with the notion of beauty

-regardless of materials, there will be some level of environmental success

-Dahlsen works with plastics, bags, etc.

-many artists work with these materials and just dump large quantities of them and call it art

-Dahlsen challenges this--hasn't gone through the required alchemy to be called art

-‘with my work I have a commitment to create something of beauty’

-going against mindset that the rubbish & trash is what everyone terms as being ugly

-recreates it, and brings a certain level of alchemy to it that makes it beautiful

-has a commitment to keep elevating these different elements to a level where they have their place in contemporary visual arts aesthetics

-same relates to all mediums, including painting

-all can be expressed as contemporary visual art while incorporating rubbish

-simple mentality/sensibility that he trusts in as a visual artist that guides artwork to a successful completion

-all of the elements of painting (line, form, composition) don't come just because you're painting elements of found objects

-Dahlsen has gone through many phases as a painter to develop his own visual language

(including all avenues of visual arts) and transfer it; does not happen overnight, most people have a career long process

-during recent time gaining PHD many things fell into place for him in a mid-career phase

-being open to learning new things is important

2. Why did you decide to combine art and the environment?

-it was entirely accidental

-did not think about it in advance and it was not planned

- Dahlsen went to a remote location to collect driftwood for furniture for new house; while he was doing that he started to come across plastics and picked them up; he ended up with 80 jumbo garbage bags, and became very interested in the fascinating objects that he had never seen before
- nature had banged them around and weathered them & turned them into something that almost looks like an organic object, but it is a man made object that nature had its way with
- started assorting by color and shape first
- before he knew it he had a large palette of plastic object

3. How effective do you believe art is in provoking personal action from the viewer?

- “i believe that it has the capacity to change things. I’m a realist; I don’t believe it is as effective as [other campaigns]” like Clean Up Australia
- not meant to be that effective, it is much more subtle
- has seen the growth of environmental art over the past 20 years as an environmental artist
- during the first phase of his environmental art he was the only one he knew of working with these materials
- considers himself a forerunner, and now he sees so many people creating environmental art with found objects that the medium has become a method of creativity itself
- now, a ton of artists work with found plastics
- he is a realist; “art gets reasonably limited airplay, but it is having its effect”
- it likely encourages viewers to contribute more to anti litter campaigns or donate to good environmental causes
- “above all, it helps the people to see in different ways, and this is the most important thing”
 - art is all about the psychology of perception having people see the world in different ways
- Dahlsen talks about microplastics as a huge problem, and how they are getting into our food sources
- if anything, art might have an effect that is reaching a different audience than the normal environmental crusaders who get up there and point their fingers...we are all a little bit more sophisticated now these days

4. Do you think it is more effective to use environmental art to appeal to individuals or to larger parts of society, like communities or political groups?

a. What target audience gets the most out of environmental art?

-it is a really wide demographic, Dahlsen wouldn't want to limit it to artists or students or the already converted

-the general public is having a very interesting time looking at environmental art

-they are being able to see creative applications to things that are normally seen as negative

-it helps people to see that you can recreate, reuse, and do things in a positive way without shoving it down peoples throats

-a broad audience

-gloom and doom is the most obvious way of dealing with things and Dahlsen is really not into that

5. What are the biggest environmental problems in Melbourne (or Australia)?

-he would only talk about things globally

-he is a visual artist before an environmental artist

-the use of fossil fuels

-plastics, of course, are a big global issue which has not been fixed

-garbage patch in the middle of the pacific; governments need to come up with a solution

-suggests that government pay the fishers who are overfishing to pick up trash & pay them by the ton of collected plastics

Interview Questions & Raw Data: Debbie Symons

1. What artistic medium do you believe is most successful in conveying environmental themes?

a. Is there even a most successful medium?

-Symons started off as a painter in her early practise, and she found personally that the message she was trying to communicate wasn't getting through using that medium (because she wasn't able to incorporate data sets)

-using digital, she was able to incorporate mass media communication vehicles that people are used to seeing

-most of her work is digital and she also does drawing as well

-Symons is currently doing a massive drawing work linking Earth Summits and endangered species

-wants to show the immensity of the problem using a massive drawing

-medium depends on what she is depicting

2. What makes a piece of environmental art successful?

-clear communication

-some of her favorite artists like Mark Dion and Rachel Barak, Fiona Hall--the work is so clear and you cannot mistake what the concept is behind the work

3. How effective do you believe environmental art is in provoking personal action from the viewer?

-George Mombiot wrote about this

-Bill McKibbin as well

-art can actually communicate to peoples hearts and minds, while there is a lot of data in the world

-art has the ability to create another layer of understanding

-2009 work *World Species Market*

-was shown in public spaces, ex. federation square

-received great feedback from people who saw it

-these people had no idea about the number of endangered species in Australia

-example of creating a new level of understanding of what science is telling us

-Symons does believe that art can have a huge voice in this argument

-art has the ability to inform people of the different layers

4. Why do you think so many people have started making environmental art recently?

-Symons would argue this point

-people have been talking about the environment and what is happening in the environment since early romantic paintings

-industrialization taking over the english landscape

-farmers setting up land with factories and black smog

-artists have been talking about what has been happening in their local environments for a long time

-more environmental art over the past 20 years/environmental art becoming more prevalent is because it has become one of the most pressing issues of our generation right now

-look at the reaction to the election--neither candidates were good options but at least Hillary did not deny climate change

-will effect us, our generation

-people are passionate about this--she references the protests after the election

-art can reach this passion and provoke new levels of understanding

5. How has your background training in painting influenced your current body of work?

-Symons is sure that it has influenced it

- She used painting approximately 20 percent of the time, has grown from a drawing background.

6. Do you create your art with a target audience in mind?

-Symons creates art for no single target audience alone--most of the work comes from just sheer frustration

-currently working on Earth Summit project about linking how many Earth Summits there were to how many extinctions have occurred since them, and this work comes out of pure frustration

-(her personal emotion is more motivating than contriving something for a viewership)

7. I found you through CLIMARTE's website. What was your experience being featured in CLIMARTE's Art+Climate=Change festival last year?

-Symons thought the festival was fantastic. The organizers did an amazing job organizing it; over 75,000 people came and visited the exhibitions and saw the work

-it got written up in international press and got some fantastic support

-she was really proud to be a part of that

-there were talks everywhere, bicycle tours on the weekend

-many nonartists came so it was a great educational tool