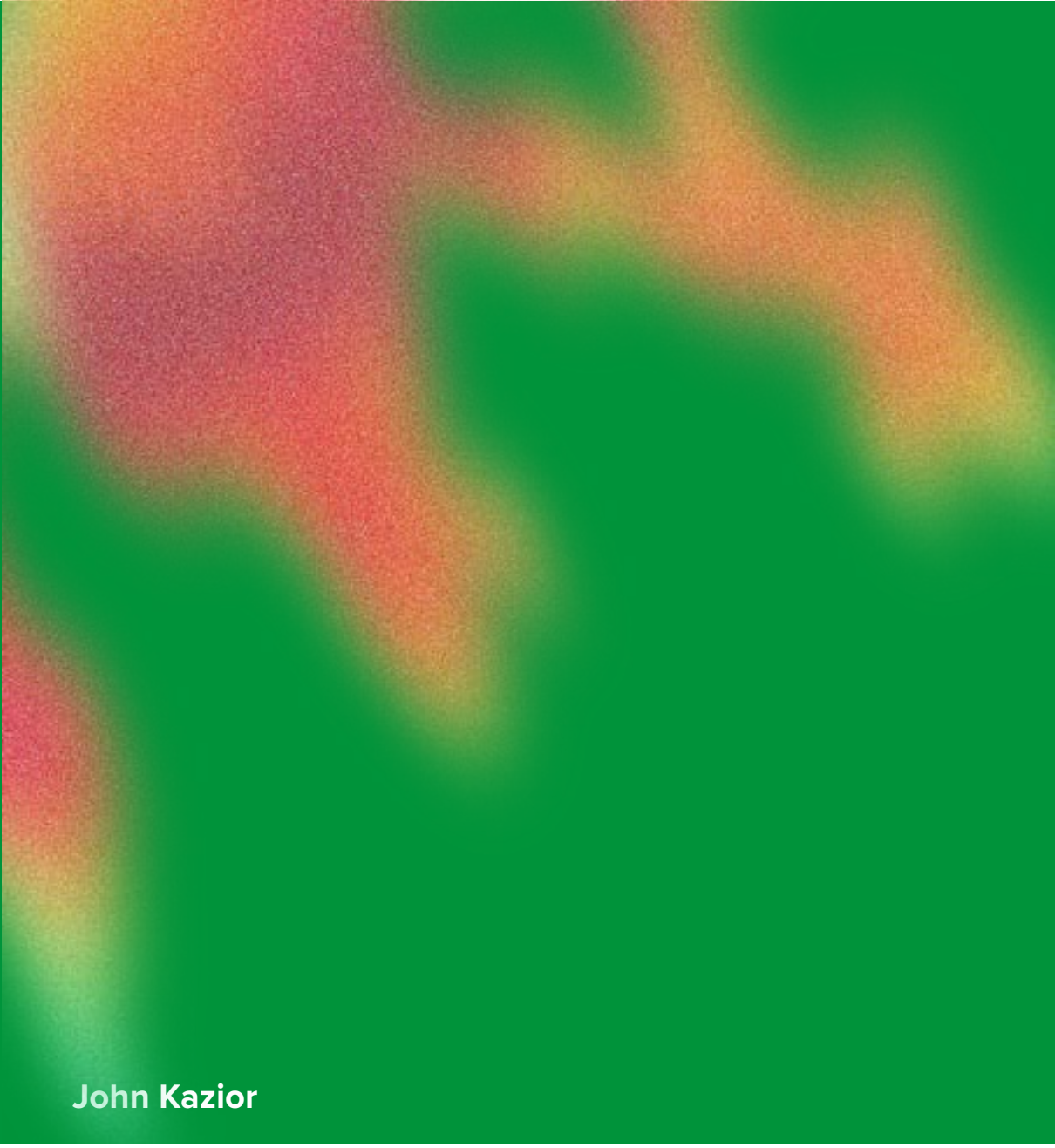

John Kazior

Every Brand Is a Climate Brand These Days, and That's Terrible For the Environment

Every Brand Is a Climate Brand These Days, and That's Terrible For the Environment

John Kazior

Amid a sea of dubious climate messaging and images, can design find visual languages for the climate crisis that leads to real action?

You're walking through the grocery store after a long day of work and suddenly you're confronted by a vegan burger patty. "Talk to your reps about climate change. Call (202) 224-3121," says the eight ounce burger from the shelf. "Elect leaders who will fight against Climate Change," another burger declares, tersely punctuated with a period. You buy the burger, and save the number in your phone.

As you do this, you check Instagram quickly and the first thing that pops up is an elegant explainer carousel from a design studio you follow about how Exxonmobil is implicated in Russia's fossil fuel expansion and its war in Ukraine. You heart it, then spend the rest of your time trying to avoid products that have been excessively packaged in single-used plastics before finally paying for your groceries with your climate- friendly online bank card.

As you're biking home, you notice a billboard from Volkswagon, advertising their latest car that is "carbon net neutral" that has mini wind turbines attached to it. As you wrap your head on what that might mean, you notice a faint green glow in the distance, and you can just make out the letters of a sign that reads "Climate Pledge Arena." Finally, you get home, and to help put your mind at ease you crack open a can of beer. But you spit it out immediately. It tastes horrible. You look at the can and realize you've accidentally bought a beer that's been poorly brewed deliberately to bring awareness to how climate change will make the ingredients traditionally used in beer scarce or completely inaccessible.

Since the fifth IPCC (intergovernmental panel on climate change) assessment, and the Paris Climate Agreement that followed, climate change has become an almost ubiquitous point of communication for many major brands. With that shift, the visual language of climate has expanded dramatically, including everything from the rampant greenwashing of multinational brands to fervent ecoactivist-influencers on TikTok. While the widespread acknowledgement of climate change has clearly made serious ground culturally, upon the release of the final section of the sixth IPCC assessment, UN General Secretary Antonio Gutierres announced that, "We are on a pathway to global warming of more than double the 1.5° limit agreed upon in Paris." Calling out false promises, saying "Some governments and business leaders are saying one thing and doing another. Simply put: they are lying."

The report itself is, in Gutierres's words, "damning"—an indication that the many messages and promises offered from businesses and government were not, in fact, reflective of action that is anywhere near to what is required for mitigation. While it must surely be counted as a some sort of victory that the words climate change are today so uncontroversial that nearly every major company has at least a webpage or a tweet about it, it's fair to ask how the ubiquitous messaging from profit-hungry brands might be breeding complacency and betraying the widespread political and civic action that is necessary to bring about the global shift the sixth IPCC assessment describes.

If the growing corporate focus on climate communication hasn't actually brought about much change since the last assessment, what is the meaning of all this climate branding? For starters, it's great for business. Across nearly every corporate sector, sustainability-focused messaging and advertising helps move more units (especially among millennials and younger consumers). But beyond sustainability, a recent study from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication revealed that at least 40 percent of Americans have or intend to in the next year reward companies that are taking steps to reduce global warming, and the same number say they intend to punish those companies that are not. That is incentive enough for companies to get on the climate wagon. Couple that fact with Pew data that shows 72 percent of people globally are "Very/somewhat" concerned about climate change and 80 percent are willing to make changes to how they live and work to reduce global climate change, and you've got yourself a hot new global trend to cash in on.

Today corporate visual communication about the climate comes in many different forms, the most flimsy and uninspired among them being the corporate climate “pledge.” These promises come from big brands that aren’t quite willing to change their operations but are more than willing to sign up to emissions offsetting programs and advertise their commitment to these programs. Often they deal in the massive contradictions that come standard with global supply chains, making it possible for a brand like IKEA to be leaders of multiple global sustainability and circularity programs with one hand and use criminal logging operations to cut down Europe’s last old-growth forest with the other. These pledges and the weak integration of climate realities are probably familiar to you through the many ways they manifest as defensive propaganda, gaslighting campaigns, and half-baked public spectacle.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from all-talk-no-action corporations are other brands that shape their entire identity around climate change related issues. This isn’t particularly new, but more and more companies like the plant-based meat brand Tofurky find their products inextricable from the climate crisis today. “We were very purposeful in minimizing our brand for this packaging. We wanted the emphasis to be on personal activism and present real ways each of us can make a difference,” says Gary Huck, creative director at Tofurky, who for a recent packaging campaign replaced their branding in favor of explicit climate messaging and calls to action. “The idea of using our packaging as thousands of tiny billboards for this activism allowed us to reach our most important audience on the shelf, in the moment.”

Among this younger crop of brands, one can find with ease real insights, figures, and initiatives that point directly to the climate crisis. In that sense, they are useful as an accessible reference point, and some campaigns like Tofurky's may even be so bold as to take up a specific political stance. But such showings are few and far between, and hardly ever are politics placed above profit—a limiting factor that for many that inevitably leads to greenwashing. There plenty of examples of small, sustainably focused brands who have happily served as the eco brand managers on nauseating greenwashing projects for larger, dirtier companies—leaving me, and many others, utterly confused as to what I am to do with all this branded climate information.

Intentionally deceptive or not, the total lack of accountability for the companies that are flooding the markets and media spaces with their own take on climate makes deciphering this information nearly impossible. Furthermore, when it comes to visual communication, it's hard to even know what kind of imagery makes an impact. "With photography and a lot of visual culture, it's really difficult to make any kind of empirical connection between any form of communication," says Toby Smith, visual programs lead at Climate Visuals, a non-profit that studies the public impact of climate change photography. In 2018, Climate Visuals conducted extensive studies in Germany, the U.K. and US into photographs that aim to depict climate change, and then based on their findings created their seven principles for climate communication.

"Furthermore, when it comes to visual communication, it's hard to even know what kind of imagery makes an impact."

CULTURAL COMPLA-CENCY

The principles include, in brief summary, “show climate change causes at scale,” “show real people,” “show local (but serious) impacts,” “be careful with protest imagery,” and more. These ideas have not been measured by consumer behavior (the traditional audience for design and marketing surveys) but rather by public survey and response offering rare insights into how people respond to visual communication about climate change. Climate Visuals has gone even further recently with two separate studies: one that looked indigenous representation in climate images and another that scrutinized diversity and framing of images of nature spaces in the U.K. At the heart of both these studies is a drive to bring the visual language of climate change closer to actual people and communities, and to represent the diversity of people on the planet who are affected by it.

Photography in particular offers a way of crafting a visual language for climate change that speaks to the interests of the masses—whether for people who live in your neighborhood or are on the other side of the world. Almost by definition, the interests of the many are in opposition to the interests of capitalism. At the end of the day, any climate information produced under capitalism has little interest in upsetting the civic and political order that today serves it so well, rising seas or not. “By saturating traditional media outlets and social media platforms with new claims about sustainability, popular brands risk creating and perpetuating the impression that we can buy our way out of the problem,” says Charlie Cray, senior strategist at Greenpeace USA. “In short, marketing sustainability carries the risk of fostering cultural complacency and cynicism about civic participation and new discourses of climate delay.”

These figures reveal the distorting effect of brand communication on climate change as well as the reality that only half of Americans find engaging brands that are taking meaningful steps to mitigate climate change to be economically accessible. This inspires little confidence in the power of climate brands to spur the immediate and widespread action the IPCC report tells us is necessary to send the earth past the 1.5 degrees of warming that will result in catastrophic climate realities.

The visual language of climate change has to take form outside of the corporate context, whether it is in photography, typography, or otherwise. But this awareness bears little fruit within the constraints of capitalism. The same study from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication revealed that 71 percent of Americans don’t know which companies to punish for not acting on climate change, 49 percent of Americans think their actions won’t have any impact on the company, and 47 percent simply cannot afford to punish carbon-intensive companies through consumer actions.

“Perhaps it is better for the designer to accept that there simply is no climate action under capitalism.”

Within this context, it feels as though there is little hope for designers, copywriters, and artists who seek to create a language of immediate action, as they more often end up as the channelers of promises perpetually delayed. Perhaps it is better for the designer to accept that there simply is no climate action under capitalism. Rather, illustrators, artists, graphic and visual designers must conceive of design that exists outside of the branding studio and corporate office. There is an opportunity to design new ways of seeing and sharing climate change with others that cuts through the crowd of climate brands—as Climate Visuals has shown, it is possible to find ways of designing a visual language for climate change that isn’t contingent on profit.

This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the Communication Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2023. The title & body text is set in Proxima Nova, designed by Mark Simonson. The pull-quote text is set in Cooper BT, designed by Oswald Bruce Cooper. The book was designed and typeset by Andrea Ham.

“There is an opportunity to design new ways of seeing and sharing climate change with others that cuts through the crowd of climate brands-”