**Art & Artists in Climate Justice**

*Edited for clarity*

**Malory:** Welcome everybody to our next series segment on artists in Climate Justice Activism in Toronto. Today we have two great artists and activists with us. We have Kenza Vanderbroeck, who is an activist who's heavily influenced a lot of Toronto scenes and has some great art, poetry, and visual art that we're going to talk more about. Then we have Kendall Marr, who's organized with Fridays for Future Toronto, and we'll hear from her on some of her poster designs and I'm sure some other stuff as well. I’m really excited to talk with y'all! Something that we should keep in mind as we're thinking about what it means to be artists in an activist space, especially a climate justice space, is that sometimes it's hard to nail down what exactly what art can do for us. It's really easy in the climate space to see how science, for example, is going to help us. We talk about climate science all the time, that’s a big part of it. And I think a lot of the time art kind of gets this sidelined kind of perspective as a discipline on what it can do. But the fact of the matter is that art has been an important tool for social change throughout history for a long time, way before even environmentalism as we know it was a thing, I guess you could say. So we're going to chat a little bit about that. My first question I wanted to ask you both, which is a little bit different maybe from what the topic is, but I just want to hear a little bit about you guys outside of your activism, what are your day jobs, your hobbies, anything you want to share. Kenza we can start with you then.

**Kenza:** Outside of activism I like to read a lot. I think it just depends kind of on my mood and where I am in my life. Sometimes I'm more creative and expressive and sometimes I'm more in a learning state. I have been reorganizing my whole life, just on the cusp of autumn and everything is changing. So I’ve sort of planning my future a little bit. But if I have time and if I have energy, I like to paint. I've been working with watercolor painting. I love spending time with friends and just like being outside and going for bike rides and that kind of thing.

**Malory:** Oh, cool. I love that. That's what it's all about. Kendall, how about you?

**Kendall:** I've been kind of working part time as a tutor for math, so I've been doing a lot of that. Otherwise I've been doing some volunteer research with SickKids and I'm starting my Master's in September, so I'll be a student again. I really liked to do like camping and like outdoors activities as well.

**Malory:** Who doesn't love camping? Well, a lot of people, me sometimes, but anyways, on that same note of ‘things we do with our spare time’ versus ‘things that we do as activists’, whatever that means, could you talk about your art for me? What does your art look like? What mediums do you work in? What messages do you go for, and that can be climate justice related or not, either perspective. Kendall, we can start with you then.

**Kendall:** I think most of my art has been really graphic, design focused. I've been using a lot of computer programs to do graphic images, just to draw people's attention to various causes through social media and posters. So I've been using Photoshop, InDesign, those kinds of programs. And yeah, the message changes, depending on the current climate in terms of what's going on in the world. The most recent message has been a just recovery from COVID-19, just cause it's so applicable right now. But before it was talking about just transition, um, and Indigenous sovereignty and uplifting marginalized voices. So it really depends on what's happening now. And what the focus should be as an umbrella term for what we're trying to achieve in terms of activist work

**Malory:** That sounds very practical. It's very much like about this goal that it's important to hit. And could you maybe talk a little bit more about graphic design? I, as a non-formal artist at all, I've heard people kind of say, ‘I'm a graphic designer. I'm not an artist’ or I've heard the opposite like ‘I'm a graphic designer and I am an artist.’ Can you speak a little bit about that for someone who, like me, doesn't know what the difference is really.

**Kendall:** Yeah. I mean, I would call graphic designing a different type of art. I think it still draws on a lot of the same skills that you would use for visual arts with mediums like paint or pastel or watercolor or whatever you're using, because you still have to have a general feel for color and spacing and stuff like that. But yeah, it's definitely practical art in the way that it's trying to communicate a message and get people to absorb the information and retain it and be excited to attend an action more so than, maybe some more like, emotional kind of connection.

**Malory:** Yeah. Yeah. Love that emotional connection with art. Um, and the little more practical too. They're both great. So Kenza, could you tell us a little bit about what your work looks like? I know you do a lot of different kinds of mediums and kind of work, but maybe you have a certain one that's near and dear, or maybe they're all equal, you love all your children equally kind of vibe.

**Kenza:** I think that my style creatively has changed a lot over the years and I've expanded. I've always been someone that is really into multimedia art anyway. I do photography and I do like some illustration I've been doing digital illustration now with, just with, uh, Microsoft paint, 3d, like just doing collages and that kind of thing. I would say that my most consistent medium was poetry for a really long time. And I wouldn't necessarily call my art or like my creations explicitly climate justice focused. I think a lot of it has to do with how I relate to my environment or how I relate to my own body. Poetry was one of the mediums I found solace in when I was coming of age and like experiencing, lots of different changes in my body and like how my body is perceived in society. And it has a lot to do with my feelings closest with nature. So a lot of it has been then reclaiming that space and the connection that I have with nature. Like living in the city, and just wanting to use nature imagery to make people kind of feel this nostalgia for nature that I think that a lot of us have ingrained in ourselves and in our bodies. So yeah, I think with writing, especially, it's easier for me to draw those parallels and to make my concept much more clear. I think that I have, I can have a clear vision with writing. Whereas with illustration and everything else, that's been more for fun, like to capture something. Or I like to do botanical drawings because I like to get to know plants more. And it allows me to have an opportunity you to research these plants for their medicinal properties, their healing properties, where they fit in the landscape of like urban growth. If they're invasive and how to understand those kind of complex relationships that we have with plants. So I would say that that's sort of what my art has been, but I mean, it changes all the time and the way the mediums that I am attracted to also change a lot. Like in the summer I was painting a lot with watercolor because I was able to just be outside in the park and have my kit with me. I wasn't writing so much, and I also have been taking a lot of photos. So I don't really know like what drives what art form for me, I think I just gravitate towards different kinds at different times in my life. But I would say they're all very naturalistic, I do a lot of nature therapy and like ideas of nature and connection to nature that sort of inherently is embedded in what I do. But it's more therapeutic if anything.

**Malory:** Oh I love that, I do some art therapy too. I don't necessarily share the product, but I think that that's really true that art is healing. Even if it's not something that we're creating for a practical purpose, it can have this internal response that we are able to heal within ourselves, but also to heal others. I think that that's something that we're hitting on a little bit is that there can be these two kinds of worlds of art. We have this goal oriented art and that is equally as valid, then there’s more of what we might think of traditionally as artists--to create a message of an emotion or of the human condition, things like that.

We talked a little bit about what are the processes you use and your influences. So this is a classic question that you must ask all artists when you're asking them anything, but what are your influences? Or, even if it's not necessarily another person or another individual, what are some things that motivate your art? And Kenza you kind of said it's hard to nail down and you kind of hit on it. So I'll switch over to Kendall and ask a little bit about that.

**Kendall:** I would say that a lot of the message drives how I portray the art. In most cases, if I'm talking about doing a poster design, I'm thinking about what kind of imagery goes along with the message. So really driving home, that specific kind of topic of interest that we're focusing on for that specific action.

Then also past posters really gave me inspiration for the ones that I came up with. So looking at like propaganda posters and understanding how and why those posters were effective at achieving big groups [at events] and getting people interested in different movements.

At times there’s been an inspiration for how I develop the poster design for current actions. But also keeping in mind how we use like different colors to portray more current events. So especially with Fridays for Future, there's a few color palettes that are really well used. So just making sure that it's cohesive with the rest of the message within the organization.

**Malory:** That's really interesting, the idea of the goal driving the piece. Do you think that that influences your medium a lot? And for Kenza—I guess for you it's less of a goal-oriented creation process, but you could think of the perspective as, ‘what your motivation is drives the medium and the process as well’. So that's very cool. Kind of switching gears a little bit, I'd love to ask how each of you got involved in the climate justice in Toronto scene or any environmental scene at all. So Kenza, could you give me a little insight into that?

**Kenza:** I think I started getting involved in environmental...not necessarily action, but awareness-raising and conversation-having when I was quite young, cause I grew up in a home that was very environmentally conscious, and my parents were always pushing me to do better for the environment, to educate my friends, and to consume less. And that was a big theme in my childhood. I think what happened in my teens was that I had very strong, meaningful connections with nature and just like being out of the city. Cause I lived really far in Scarborough at that point. I had access to a beautiful ravine and a river and a nice water system and lots of wildlife. So just being in that area has ignited that desire for conservation and for the protection of these things. And then I went and I did a degree in environmental studies, and that's when I got exposed to the ways in which social justice issues intertwined with environmental justice issues, hence climate justice as a whole. And that's when I started getting involved more in direct action, or in organizing, or in solidarity actions and like allyship, I guess, with other groups doing different kinds of work. But I think that direct action is a new addition in my life. I have only really done it for a year or two, and I got involved mainly through Extinction Rebellion when I was abroad in the Netherlands. I was studying for university and I doing an exchange, and that was one of the only climate action groups at the time that was active there. I made a lot of good friends, that was sort of how I met people. So it became like a social thing for me as well, meeting people that were like minded, who cared about the same things, that we have shared values with. And then it kind of moved on from there. When I came back to Toronto, I got involved with Extinction Rebellion here and tried to lift it off the ground a little bit. But, as you might know, it has disbanded. So unfortunately it's no longer part of like the climate justice scene. But now I'm kind of in this transition, looking, ‘where can I put my energy? What's the next group for me? What is the next thing I'm passionate about?’ And I'm thinking maybe food justice, because I love food who doesn't love food, and I’ve spent a lot of time working at farmer's markets. I am very passionate about local food and I would like to see more food sovereignty and in a big city like Toronto.

**Malory:**  Kenza that's like a great point, I love what you said about the community element of organizing or activism. And I'm curious, could you describe what for some of us who are watching who might not know what you mean by direct action? In your own words, whatever that might be.

**Kenza:** Right. So direct action I would say is a form of activism that is more, like, in your face, in the sense that you are carving time out of your day or your year or your week or whatever to go and take up physical space somewhere. So that can be picketing an MPS office to make certain kinds of demands, you can do like postering in their office, or whatever. You can also be like blocking railroads. It can be blocking roads. You can just be causing traffic and causing some kind of disruption. That's kind of what I perceive as direct action, but I think direct action more broadly is anything that you can do physically to sort of impact other people. It's like an activity that you can do with other people. And I think that also can include things like postering and canvassing and talking to people, past the public sphere, outside of the house and in the street. It's definitely a very broad definition, but I think when I say draft action, I'm like talking more in my experience of like occupying space at an MP's office or blocking the street, that kind of thing.

**Malory:** Absolutely. I think that that really hits on something that we've seen as a theme already in some of these interviews, of how many different types of activism there are. We use this term activist and activism, and that means a million things, right? It can mean that you're an organizer or you're an educator or you're a caregiver or you’re someone who takes up space, a direct actor. And there's many, many more. So now I want to switch back to Kendall--Could you tell us how you got involved and were you originated in this Toronto climate justice scene?

**Kendall:** After I graduated from my undergrad at university of Ottawa, I was working in Toronto, and I was interested in the climate. It's been something that my family had talked about throughout my childhood and I started to bring in different sources of information through social media and through the internet, so that broadened my perspective on environmental issues. At that point I was thinking of it in the very narrow terms of decreasing greenhouse gases and looking at emissions and fossil fuels as well. Whereas now I know that climate justice encompasses so many different things. But that's how I first started thinking about climate justice and climate change as an issue--I wanted to be more involved. And it was overwhelming. I was quickly inundated with so much information and so many negative articles that was really hard for me to process at the beginning. And I think I was looking for something that I could physically do to be part of the solution instead of just someone with [knowledge of] all of these different things from across the world that I didn't have any impact on, so I was looking for something local that I could do. And I got pretty involved with Plastic Free TO. They're a sister pair that started doing some different actions, inviting people to participate in small things at the beginning. I just kind of got to know them and started thinking about climate justice in a bigger way, and then adding so many things to my social media that I kind of just understood it in a in a broader sense. And then I attended the September 27th climate strike action at Queens park, which was a really big action. And I had befriended one of the main organizers who is also on one of these videos, Allie. And she commented on my post, where I had my sign and I was at Queens park and asked if I wanted to be an organizer. And then I just kind of jumped into that organizing space. It’s kind of helped deal with that anxiety of like the climate crisis being so much bigger than oneself and having, like Kenza said, a community of people that have similar values that you can talk to about these things with that are really hard to process as an individual, that I found difficult to talk about with people who didn't really understand the extent of the issues, and could sympathize in the same way as fellow activists that are motivated so much that they're doing the work on the ground for free. So yeah, that's kind of where I got involved--from social media.

**Malory:** That's a great tool, that social media, for sure. And on that note of knowing others and trickling into that experience. Do you think, based on the other artists in Toronto who you've seen doing social justice work--not necessarily just climate justice—but do you think that Toronto has an art scene that is distinct in our social change? Like, historically, you know, you got the the London scene of the sixties, does Toronto have a 2020 scene? We can start with Kenza here.

**Kenza:**  I think there is a scene for sure. I think that it's not like one big community or movement. I would characterize Toronto as a city of neighborhoods in a city of different communities. And I think that's very much the same in the music community or in the art community and the painting community, all of these. There's definitely individuals in each and every kind of hub that is doing social justice work with their work, or they're at least representing or projecting their fears and their feelings about the climate crisis or about racial injustice or about various different things that we're talking a lot about now. So it's definitely there, but I think that we need to push it in a way where we can bridge all of these communities together and sort of have more of a collective movement where we're working towards the same thing. Or we realize that we have already been working towards the same thing, just in these different channels. And I'd love to see it grow and become more unified or more connected in some way.

**Malory:** That's a great point. This idea of we have all these kinds of mini communities that probably share influences and share motivations, and making that merge happen. Kendall, what do you think? Maybe this more practical end of those who collaborate on posters, things like that--Is there a community that sprang up around that?

**Kendall:** In terms of art, there are a number of artists that are across the board in all of these different hubs, like Kenza’s mentioned. And whether they're totally connected is not necessarily there yet, but I think a lot of these groups are doing a lot of outreach to make sure that there's communication between groups. But being grassroots as climate activists it’s often hard to have really large groups of people because there's no kind of overseeing of the work that's getting done and everyone's kind of just working within their own capacity. But in terms of the art scene, I think there's a lot of like great artists who are doing things within each group. And on the practical side, they're doing a lot of outreach, making sure people are aware of what's coming up and how people can get involved. And on a more emotional connection side, they're doing a lot of art interactive actions where people can actually participate in making art and stuff like that. So I think there's different ways to approach the art scene and there’s not necessarily a cohesive art scene as a general thing in Toronto. But those connections are being made and people are doing the work within each of the separate kind of grassroots organizations.

**Malory:** Very cool. A lot to think about on how we share these different routes that then branch off into different things. I don't know, I'm not a poet, ha! My last question that I wanted to hit, something that I'm asking everybody is in conservation work and in environmental work, it can be very doom and gloom. It can feel really sad. It can be overwhelming a lot of the time. So I'm wondering, do you guys have any victories of instances where you felt that your art succeeded? In whatever way you might define a victory because that can be a million things. Kendall, could we start with you?

**Kendall:** My first organizing action was after that September 27th climate strike. It was the November 29th climate strike of last year. That was my first attempt at making a poster, and that action was pretty successful. We ended up having like a few hundred people show up and it was pretty big considering most of our outreach had to be done ourselves. Whereas for September 27th, a lot of that momentum was from across the ocean in Europe, and Greta [Thunberg] was actually in Montreal at the time. That event promoted itself and people hopped on board because it was trending, I guess. But for November 29th, that outreach was really grassroots and we were all on the ground doing a lot of work for that, all of us organizers. Putting out my poster, doing all of the outreach there, attending different meetings with different social justice groups or workers unions. Stuff like that was really rewarding. And the outcome of the day of action was super exciting. And I think it was a win for us because we had a good turnout, even without all of that hype from before.

**Malory:** That's great, thanks! Now Kenza, obviously a lot of your art has a different goal, but there are so many kinds of victories and I'd love to hear what maybe you feel that might be.

**Kenza:** On a personal level, I've had really positive experiences doing poetry readings. Of course that’s not the case anymore, but for a certain time, I was doing a lot of poetry readings and performing spoken word. It always felt like a really big victory, even if there was just one person coming up to me after the reading and saying, ‘Hey, your words really resonated with me. And I feel really close to this one thing that you said,’ or that they were moved by something. That always feels really, really good. But I think also in an explicitly climate action sense all of the options that I have been a part of or have helped organize, I've also seen them as a sort of a creative endeavor. Cause we all have to get together and work towards a certain message and we use imagery and we use costumes or we use messaging or that kind of thing. So in a sense, we all pulled together, and whatever we have creatively come up with, and any action feels like a success, even if it doesn't reach such a big audience. So I have been part of smaller actions and I've been part of larger actions. I do think about one in particular, which was one of my first times getting involved in direct action. And that was not last November, but the November before, I guess, or maybe it was last November I don’t remember. I co-organized a peaceful sit in protest at Bill Morneau’s office in the wake of the trans mountain pipeline approval project. That was the first time I'd ever done anything like that, but I was very enraged by it. And I worked with people who had experience with it. Me and, I think, 12 other youth, we all occupied the office and we did this big art build. We made all of these posters and we put them all up and in the office and it was just beautiful. And it was so nice. Even on the outside, we had posters around with Trudeau's face and people on the street were walking past, like ‘Yeah!’, cheering us on. So that felt like a really big success, that was really nice. It's just nice when there's a good energy and people are having a nice time and it's enjoyable and you're having conversations and you're making something together. And if people in the street are also stopping by to see what's going on, that's great.

**Malory:** Yeah, that's brilliant. I love the idea that every action is an art piece in a way--through collaboration, through creativity and through expressing these different ideas. I want to thank you both so much for coming and for speaking to me about your art and your work, you guys are awesome and Kenza, I'd like to also say I read some of your stuff and it's definitely made my heart glow and I've definitely connected. Kendall your posters are also very nice. I’m not sure I had an emotional response, I guess. Actually, I'll take it back. I had an emotional response, ha! You guys are both great! Thank you so much for coming, I appreciate it.