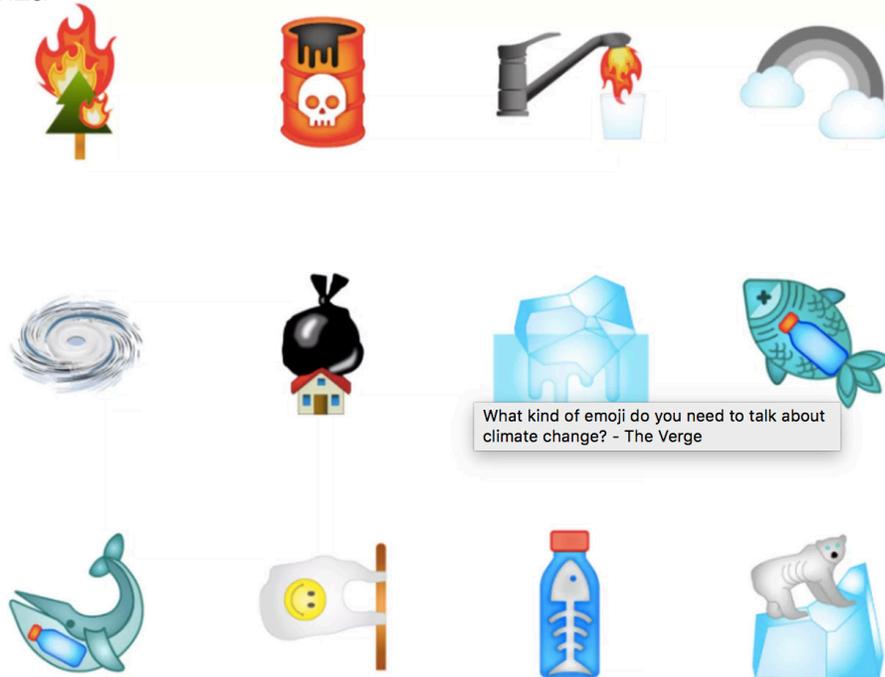


THE VERGE

What kind of emoji do you need to talk about climate change?

by Alessandra Potenza



Emoji have become a language of their own, but until recently, the language made it hard to talk about climate change: There are no emoji about pollution, wildfires, or rising sea levels. So artists Marina Zurkow and Viniyata Pany launched a set of mobile stickers specifically about climate change, called Climoji.

The icons depict melting sea ice, starving polar bears, dead trees, and flooded people. They're intended to raise awareness about some of the most important issues of our time: global warming and environmental destruction. Need an emoji to express your frustration with plastic pollution? Thanks to Zurkow and Pany, now you have a whale with a plastic bottle in its stomach, or a plastic bottle with a fish skeleton inside.



Climate change is already affecting the world, from rising temperatures to rising sea levels. Hurricanes and wildfires made 2017 the most expensive year on record for natural disasters — and scientists say that these catastrophic events will become the new normal as the world continues to warm up. This isn't an issue for the future, Zurkow tells *The Verge*. So it seems imperative to make ways for people to talk about it.

“Why are some of our primary communication tools avoiding this issue? Why isn't there even a hurricane icon in the official emoji set?” says Zurkow.

Climoji was launched as an art project, thanks to New York University's Green Grants, but Zurkow plans to make it big. In the spring, she wants to approach Facebook, and see if the social media giant will add the stickers to its own library. And eventually, she'd like the Unicode Consortium — the Silicon Valley-based group of computer and internet companies that approve new emoji — to adopt the climate change icons. But before that happens, more people need to use the emoji. Right now, about 400 people have downloaded the set, Zurkow says.



Image: Climoji

The *Verge* spoke to Zurkow about Climoji, what she hopes the project will accomplish, and what role art can play in discussions about climate change.

How do you hope that people will use these emoji?

The first thing is, I think [emoji have] become great shorthand for people who are influencers. Anybody who wants to do a campaign, anybody who wants to get somebody's attention, icons are really good at this kind of condensed non-linear, non-sentence-based messaging. So I'm hoping that people will be able to use these as a kind of invitation to a conversation. The second is a lot more sketchy, and this is where as an academic and an artist I move into more of a hypothetical realm. There's a lot of studies done on how metaphor enters into language. All emoji are metaphors: lips are a metaphor for love, for kissing someone. So, can these things as visual metaphors amplify and naturalize the conversation around climate change?

“THERE NEEDS TO BE A SENSE OF BEING MOVED BY HOW GRIM THINGS ARE.”

The most obvious example would be the drowning arm sticking out of the whirlpool: if that becomes an icon for personal despair, does that steer us away from the conversation of climate change or do we think of flooding and drowning as an everyday enough occurrence to become a metaphor? Emoji are often about personal expression; they're not that often about fact-based things. Sometimes they are: I had a glass of wine or, I'm taking a car. And I think that's probably where these will be used most but also, there will possibly have some emotional weight.

The emoji are pretty bleak, and some people in the climate community say that promoting a totally doom-and-gloom scenario won't help people act on climate change. What do you think?

The answer is not simple. We plan to do a set of icons that will address mitigation and adaptation and a kind of philosophical alternative to the models that we live on at the moment. Those might include embracing ecological diversity, ecological justice, and environmental justice. But it's also solar, organic farming and composting, wind turbines, less meat consumption, having less children, driving less cars, and riding bikes. It's all that: these are mitigation and adaptation towards resilience. But part of that has to be a mental shift. And I think in order to make that mental shift, there needs to be a sense of being moved by how grim things are.

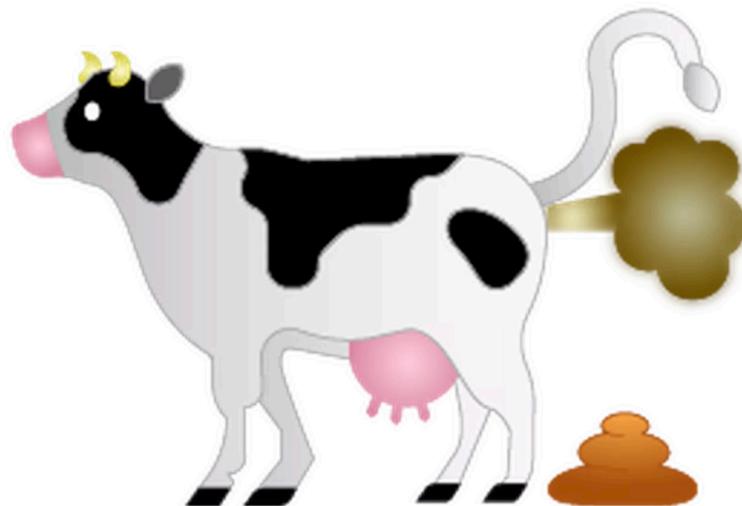


Image: Climoji

For us, it really is chapter one: chapter one is, be awake and be okay with experiencing with how discomfiting this is, without letting your guilt consume you. I don't think the way out is to pretend there's a solution, and if I do one thing, I can go back to exactly what I was doing. I think we need to be participating in a much larger change. I feel guilty that I've created such a depressing set of icons. And yet I feel really committed to holding that space for discomfort.

If you went back, would you add more positive emoji in this set?

No. I feel guilty when people confront me about how bleak it is, but I wouldn't change it. I would make another set that are really about resiliency. I want to move forward, out of things that imply fixity, that imply resolution, that are not systemic answers, systemic responses. And I realize how unpopular this is. When I say I don't want to provide a solution, people become disappointed.



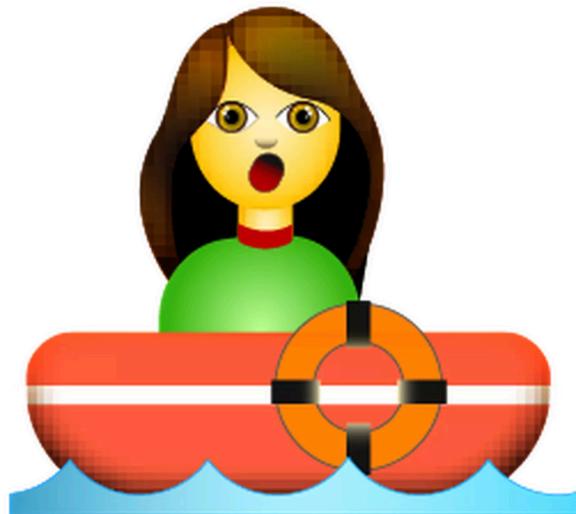
Image: Climoji

What's your favorite emoji?

The saddest one, the one that breaks my heart, is the whale with the plastic bottle in its stomach. I've been doing a lot of work on the North Atlantic right whale population, which is on the border of extinction. I've been working with the Center for Coastal Studies and a group of artists who's been engaged in the Cape Cod seashore. It's really depressing.

As Earther points out, the Climoji characters that are drowning are brown, while the one on the lifeboat is white. Why?

We didn't make, as Unicode does, six shades of skin color for people to identify with personally. So, in lieu of that, some decision had to be made. The unfortunate truth is that people who are predominantly brown are going to suffer. It is a demographic problem, right? People who are white or symbolically white are going to do better in the face of climate change. They're going to have more escape hatches, like lifeboats. They're going to literally have more lifeboats to get out. That's a fact. That's happening already.



What role can art have in communicating the risks of climate change?

All issues that require change and compromise and a new point of view require an emotional component. There's very little logic that makes for large-scale change and I think that climate change is example A in this. The two things I think are going to change the way that we think about the climate and the way that we think about our participation as citizens and as individuals and as consumers, those are going to be an emotional shift, like a shift of mind, an understanding of kinship beyond our immediate tribe and immediate interests. And art can do that. Art can shift those things in a way that all the metrics in the world, all the logic, all the empirical information just won't. The other way is, of course, more grassroots efforts. But that's not my business. My business is, with some humor and some fairness and some invitation, to try to nudge paradigms a tiny bit to the side.