In Paris, Art Confronts 2 Crises

By ELIAN PELTIER   DEC. 9, 2015

PARIS — The terror attacks on Nov. 13 traumatized Paris and gave rise to new fears about extremism, but the attackers' focus on cultural and street life also cast a cloud over a celebration of environmentally themed art tied to the United Nations climate conference, or COP 21, where negotiators are trying to reach a global agreement on limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

A plan to light the Eiffel Tower through the power of bicyclists was halted because of an emergency ban on public gatherings in Paris. Large blocks of melting ice, an installation by the artist Olafur Eliasson, were moved from the Place de la République, which suddenly became a site of mourning, to the Place du Pantheon across the city.

"I am afraid the attacks have killed the festive atmosphere the COP would have had," said Naziha Mestaoui, an artist who covered the Eiffel Tower with projections of stylized trees for a project called "1 Heart 1 Tree." Like many artists, Ms. Mestaoui had to change her plans — she was forced to cancel the public inauguration of her installation on Nov. 29 because of security measures.

"We wanted the whole city to vibrate during the COP," said Bruno Julliard, a deputy mayor of Paris who oversees Parisian cultural life. "The attacks have lowered our ambitions." More than 160 events and shows were scheduled around the Paris area, including street art, photo exhibitions, installations like the ice blocks and interactive projects.
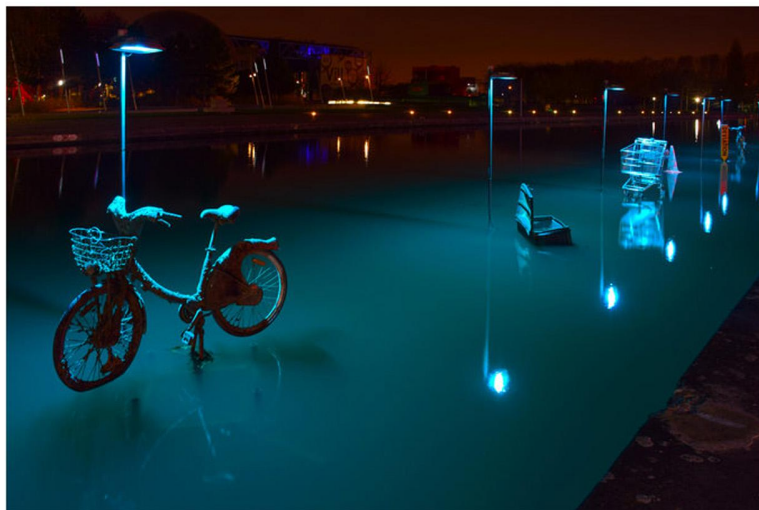
Since the attacks — in which 130 people were killed — artists who were preparing to exhibit their work during the climate conference have been struggling to figure out what their role should be: Should they advocate for more culture in public spaces as a response to the attacks, in addition to trying to make the public aware of the risks of climate change?

Projects created to run with the COP21 climate change conference in Paris included "Sleeping Water" by the British artist Michael Pinsky, who collected objects from the Seine and its canals. Michael Pinsky

Yann Toma's "Human Energy," a symbolic project to light the Eiffel Tower.

Joel Saget/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

"The Eiffel Tower has become a symbol of peace, and this is what arts should convey during the COP," Ms. Mestaoui said.

After the attacks, the tower went temporarily dark and was then lighted in the red, white and blue of the French flag. An image of the tower as a peace sign quickly went viral on social media.

For her installation during the first week of the climate conference, which started on Nov. 29 and is running through Friday, Ms. Mestaoui covered the tower with projections of trees. For 10 euros, about $11, participants could put a virtual tree and their names on the tower, with their purchase supporting the planting of a real tree in one of seven reforestation programs in Australia, Brazil, France, India, Kenya, Peru and Senegal.

More than 52,000 virtual trees were projected over six days, Ms. Mestaoui said, the number of real trees that eventually will be planted.

For the second week of the conference, the lighting of the tower was to be powered by people bicycling at its base. That was called off when the government banned gatherings in public spaces.

Instead, Yann Toma, the French artist who created the project, "Human Energy," devised a symbolic plan to light the tower with a mix of "mental energy," pulled from tweets about the climate conference, and "physical energy," from calories burned by joggers using a running mobile app. The resulting "Units of Artistic Energy" were displayed on a counter projected on the monument.

"We keep going anyway, because arts must have a function of mobilization," Mr. Toma said. "This is what the terrorists attacked."

Despite the constraints the attacks created, other artists have still been able to convey messages about the environment in exhibits all over the city.

At the Grand Palais, the flagship of the World's Fair here in 1900, Tomás Saraceno set up the installation "Aerocene," two spheres hanging from the glass roof of the building that are a replica of a larger project in which air-filled balloons would float around the earth powered only by solar energy.

Also at the Grand Palais, Lucy and Jorge Orta have set up their Antarctica passport bureau, where for €1 visitors can buy a passport that makes them symbolic citizens of the continent.

Ms. Orta said they wanted to activate a form of citizenship with a place that carries so much meaning.

"Let's make people understand that they are also affected by climate change," she said. "In cities like Paris, people are not that affected, and you see it as an abstract thing."

For "L'eau qui dort" (Sleeping Water), the British artist Michael Pinsky has dredged up 40 objects from the Seine and its canals. Rusty box springs, discarded bicycles and shopping carts on which mussels had started to proliferate are fixed on metal shafts and suspended just above the surface of the Canal de l'Ourcq in northern Paris. Mr. Pinsky's goal, he said, was to "confront people with what they throw away, making what used to be invisible, visible again."

In an interview before the Nov. 13 attacks, Mr. Pinsky said he had envisioned the dredged-up objects as otherworldly, simply as things that would not exist had he not removed them from the water.

But now, he said, the objects hold a different meaning for him. Lined up along the canal, illuminated with colorful but crude lights, and surrounded by squeaking sounds that are part of the installation, "they are like ghostly creatures appearing from the water," Mr. Pinsky said.

"Like terrorism: It is not visible and yet it's there, around us, and it can suddenly appear or happen at any time," he added.

If the charged atmosphere after the attacks added tension to some of the installations, there was also the uncomfortable fact that not all of the art was particularly environmentally friendly.

For example, the energy consumed by the lighting of the Eiffel Tower under Ms. Mestaoui's project was 30 percent higher than usual, she said. But she said that the additional energy was beside the point.

"Let's not reject the reality that we live in, that we depend upon and benefit from," she said. "Let's rather figure out how to make these tools and technologies part of the solution."

For his installation, "Ice Watch Paris," Mr. Eliasson, the Danish-Icelandic artist and designer, shipped 12 blocks of ice to the city, first on a boat from Nuuk, Greenland, to Aalborg, Denmark, then by refrigerated truck to Paris. Along the way, they melted from 100 tons to 80 tons, and once exhibited in Paris got smaller and smaller as the conference went on.

The carbon footprint of "Ice Watch Paris" was about 30 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, a standard unit that measures the emissions of different greenhouse gases, according to Julie's Bicycle, a charity that promotes environmental sustainability in the arts. That amount is the equivalent of about 30 round-trip plane flights from Paris to Nuuk, more than 2,200 miles from the French capital, the group said.

But Mr. Eliasson said he believed the lessons learned from watching the ice melt over the course of the conference offset any energy expended bringing it to Paris. "I hope to inspire a feeling of inclusion into the climate debate, so people in the street don't feel disconnected," he said. "If you feel disconnected, you also feel indifferent." The attacks forced Mr. Eliasson to relocate his project to the Pantheon, on the Left Bank.

In addition to making an environmental point, Mr. Eliasson said, he hoped his work would celebrate cultural activity as being an essential part of human nature.

"As much as the attacks were trying to sit on my generation, this was an attempt to attack our identity," he said. "But culture is so much stronger."