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ART; Looking for Inspiration in the Melting Ice

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BOULDER, Colo.

HULKING over this bucolic college town like Frankenstein's redoubt, the National Center for Atmospheric Research is a constant reminder that Boulder -- party-loving college students and Olympic-caliber athletes aside -- is at heart a science town.

More specifically it's a hotbed of research on one of the scientific world's most pressing issues: climate change. And it was probably inevitable that the topic would be harnessed by the town's 35-year-old art museum.

"We have the highest density of climate scientists in the world in the Boulder-to-Broomfield corridor," said Marda Kirn, who runs EcoArts, an interdisciplinary arts organization here. Her group is a driving force behind "Weather Report: Art and Climate Change," an ambitious new art show at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. "We have buildings full of climate scientists," she added, as if climatology Ph.D.'s were stacked like rolls of paper towels at Costco.

For the show dozens of artists, including Agnes Denes, Mary Miss, Subhankar Banaejee, Andrea Polli, Joel Sternfeld, Iain Baxter and Chris Jordan, were asked to join with scientists to create pieces about climate change. Some of the artists had been collaborating with scientists for years; Ms. Kirn matched other artists with scientists from the Boulder area. "The artists had to be very specific about the questions they wanted to ask and the research they were doing," she said. "Matching them with scientists was almost like setting up dates."

Her idea -- to create an interdisciplinary show on global warming -- enticed the art critic Lucy Lippard to step into the curator's role for the first time in 15 years. "It's a killer -- it's the hottest topic, so to speak," said Ms. Lippard, 70, who in her long career has championed Conceptual Art, public art and feminism in books including "The Pink Glass Swan" and "The Lure of the Local."

The pieces in the show spill from the museum to the park across the street, along the Boulder Creek path and up the mountainside to the university and beyond.

The collaborations vary from artist to artist and scientist to scientist. Brian Collier, an artist in Kansas City, Mo., drew on data and imagery provided by Chris Ray, an ecologist and evolutionary biologist at the University of Colorado, and by Shana Weber, the sustainability manager at Princeton, for his work "Pika Alarm." He chose the pika, a tiny mountain-dwelling mammal related to rabbits, as his subject because it may prove to be the first animal to become extinct because of global warming. It's also very cute, he acknowledged.

"I'm always looking for accessible focal points for people to approach big problems," Mr. Collier said. He mounted a motion-activated speaker atop a pole that emits the pika's singular high-pitched cry when someone approaches or passes by. A help-yourself postcard describes the creature's plight.

For some collaborators the research and creative roles began to overlap. Working from her home on a remote Maine island the artist Aviva Rahmani communicated for months with the geologist and environmental scientist Jim White via a desktop sharing system. With Mr. White's input she created computer images of the effects global warming might have on the Nile, Mississippi and Ganges river deltas, all of which are home to major urban centers. Ms. Rahmani manipulated satellite photographs of the three sites to show how they might fare under a hotter sun as Mr. White gave feedback on her speculations.

To their surprise they found it easy to collaborate, both said. "When Jim and I started working together, we each had preconceptions about the other's work," Ms. Rahmani said. "We found out immediately that we're on the same page. He would be talking to me about the ethical implications of the decisions we need to make about global warming. I would be talking to him about how we're raping the planet."

Working with Sheila F. Murphy, a hydrologist, and Peter W. Birkeland, a geologist, the artist Mary Miss looked for ways to help local residents envision the flooding of Boulder Creek, in the heart of town. Ultimately she affixed six-inch bright blue discs to trees, telephone poles, the facade of the museum and the doors of the downtown library. "If you look from one

dot to the next, each is placed at the high-water mark of a 500-year flood," she said.

And Jane McMahan received permission to head up to Arapahoe Glacier, which provides drinking water for Boulder, and remove a hunk of it with a chain saw. Her collaborator, the glaciologist W. Tad Pfeffer, has said the glacier has receded at least 100 feet since 1960; the artist's solution was to put the ice on "life support" in a plastic enclosure that she likens to an infant incubator. Solar panels power the refrigerator for the incubator, which sits in a sunny park between the creek and the library.

Amy Franceschini, a performance artist and designer from San Francisco who has collaborated with scientists for several years, was inspired this time by Arthur Shapiro, a professor of evolution and ecology at the University of California, Davis. Ms. Franceschini, who joined him in the field as he took notes, later spoke of his line of research -- butterfly migration -- as if it were an art installation or an earthwork.

"I told him: 'You're as much of an artist as any artist I know,' " she said.

"He does his practice along a line that stretches across California, from the coast up to about 3,000 feet," she said, adding: "Their migratory patterns are changing. They're moving higher into the hills as it gets hotter."

Ms. Franceschini is one of many artists who are trying to invent strategies for combating global warming. For the show her art collective, Futurefarmers, created a performance piece called "The Unfinished Journey of Carl Linnaeus." Visitors were invited to climb into a structure in Central Park in Boulder and discuss quotations from scientists about climate change. Ms. Franceschini was curious: "Do laypeople have ideas about how we might live differently? Do you have to be a scientist to be the voice of reason, or can you be a freak who's building inventions in your garage?"

Ms. Lippard has noted the split between prescriptive and descriptive work about climate change by the artists and scientists. "It remains to be seen which will be more effective, imagining what the change will be like or coming up with ideas for what to do about it," she said. "I want to include some way at the museum for people to talk about which piece made them feel more like doing something."

Ms. Lippard has long argued that a powerful image can foster change. She cites "The Mountain in the Greenhouse," a piece in the show by the environmental artists Helen and Newton Harrison. They were spurred by the research of the Viennese biologist Georg Grabherr, who found that the habitats of Alpine plants were moving slowly upmountain as the temperature warmed. The resulting work, which shows flowers fleeing up a mountain, is "one of those pieces where all of a sudden I could really grasp the whole concept," Ms. Lippard said. "An emblematic image can really make a difference."

In an installation by Melanie Walker and George Peters -- constructed, they say, from the detritus of an outmoded energy system -- black-painted power lines, anchored by lumps of coal, lean away from a walkway at the atmospheric research center. Stretched taut between poles are ribbons that vibrate in the breeze, emitting an eerie, thereminlike whir.

For visitors among the installations in "Weather Report" it's clear that conceptual art and science have more in common than some may have thought. "At the core of art and science is this flame," Ms. Kirn said. "It's about curiosity and asking questions and not taking no for an answer."

Ms. Lippard agreed. "The critics used to say that conceptual art brings in too much other stuff, too many ideas," she said, but "I love the idea that art can become something that acts in the world."