

The Writing's on the Wall

By Maya Blenkinsop



The finished wall at the European School of Brussels II.

When the pandemic put an end to on-street climate protests, art student Amélie Zimmermann came up with a concrete alternative, almost literally, by painting a wall to raise awareness about climate change in her school. It has sparked a “Writing’s on the Wall” movement, inspiring other schools to do the same.

“Since we can’t do protests and events, I was thinking let’s do this, something that stays. It’s there and sends a message,” Amélie said about her 53 square metre mural at one of the European schools in Brussels.

“Save our future. Cut 11% of emissions now” is the text at the top of the mural, referring to www.cut11percent.org, a campaign that wants to make public the emissions reductions required per country to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement and limit global warming.

The art that brings this science to life in Amélie’s wall alludes to Norman Rockwell’s painting, “The Right to Know” (1968). Rockwell was responding to the injustices of his time, especially the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. His Americans are replaced by an image of young people who will bear the burden of future climate change.

Other European schools, including in Munich, Mol and Alicante, are now planning their own walls. The progress on all of these walls can be seen on the map on the [Climate Academy](https://climateacademy.org) website.

Without COVID-19, there may have been no painted wall. Pandemic restrictions prevented climate activists from gathering. But Amélie decided in spring 2020 that she wanted to create a fixed painting to raise awareness about what is still our planet’s most threatening challenge. She wants people to think, and it is hard to ignore a giant mural.



Day 4: Amélie Zimmermann painting the wall.

Climate change has been an important issue for the young German-Italian, who turned vegetarian at 14 because of the climate challenge. She marched at multiple “climate strikes” in Brussels, such as in March 2020 when Greta Thunberg attended. She is also a member of her school’s Climate Academy, which organised the [world’s first](#) large-scale strike. The academy believes small acts by individuals, such as to reuse and recycle, are of limited value and that systemic change is needed.

Matthew Pye, head of the academy said it was a challenge for Amélie to ensure the wall communicated in a powerful way and did not just look like “casual graffiti.”

Amélie, who turned 18 when the painting began, started sketching and eventually chose the school as her canvas. The project was warmly welcomed and was jointly paid for by the students and the school, and some staff even offered to provide scaffolding and to prime the wall. But there were still challenges.

Amélie assembled a team of four fellow students and her art teacher. The teacher drove the students to a paint store and they loaded up with spray paint. Amélie said this was a totally new task for the team, including the art teacher.

A few weeks before painting began, Amélie and her team learned that a leak was affecting the wall they had planned to use. This meant switching to another wall, forcing Amélie to alter her design to fit the new space. The last-minute changes were stressful, she said. The team later found that the new wall also had a leak and that the original wall was fine. This confusion caused a lot of unwanted strain.



Amélie Zimmermann tracing the design's outline on the wall.

On March 25, Amélie’s 18th birthday, the team set to work. They arrived at school in the evening during the holidays because they needed a projector to show the design’s outline during the dark. Strong winds made it harder to paint and paint was lost in the process, but after five days they were finished.

The bright blue and green mural is now a part of the school and the wall is set as a permanent protest.

In less than a year, Amélie finished this outstanding project. As lockdown hit us all, Amélie had fought back harder than ever.

Kamila Malik, the school's principal said she was very proud that students had shown they looked to the future and were an example to follow.

"Every day, when I walk in front of the wall, I can feel that I am surrounded by conscious people. If this unique place contributes to changing the attitude of a single unconscious person, I definitely think it was worth creating it," she said. Joachim Schmelz, head of the secondary section, said he was honoured to be the director of such an engaged community. "The spirit must be spread and I am sure it will," he said.

Amélie herself said she too was proud of creating the wall, but she stressed that the most important thing was to make people think. "We need to raise awareness about the effects climate change will have on people, people like you and me," she said. She believes that people too often only think of climate change in terms of temperature changes, but not about its destabilising impact.

The wall, she adds, shows that people who have contributed least to the problem now, will end up suffering the most. "It's not just drastic temperature and weather changes... People need to understand that this is just the beginning, entire ecosystems are going to collapse, the oceans will rise and areas that are now liveable will become desert."

Her hope is that the "Writing's on the Wall" movement will spread and encourage more schools to do similar projects, with the school's Climate Academy offering to support and advise.

Academy leader, [Mr Pye](#), saw biblical parallels in the wall and the tale about a message of future misfortune written on the wall of a Babylonian king.

"In the end, the wall is so imposing, impressive and strong. And actually, because of the deep blues, it makes me think of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon - which is a bit ironic because of the origin of the phrase, "The Writing's on the Wall," he said.



The interview with Amélie



Timelapse of day 3's progress. Click on image to see video.

NOTES: The mural at the European School of Brussels II was painted by Amélie Zimmermann, Sofia Ferraioli, Irene Costagliola, Danny O'Brien, Eva Kastrinos and art teacher Fabrice Thomasseau.

The data of Cut11percent.org has been endorsed by many eminent climate scientists, including those from the IPCC, the UNEP, the WHO.