



ATMOSPHERIC MONUMENT



What does it mean for art to be political? Is there such a thing as a “real world” out there, outside the white cube, which can function as the “other” of art? Can art remain situated within the realm of art, and yet be directed outwards, at “reality”? Amy Balkin is a San Francisco-based artist whose work points to an altogether different direction. Her projects

are a product of the reality of geopolitical and environmental struggles, “where material, spatial and political questions are specific and not without consequence”.

With the support of DOCUMENTA (13), Balkin’s project *Public Smog* will attempt to inscribe the earth’s atmosphere onto the UNESCO’s World Heritage List.



BY ANA TEIXEIRA PINTO



ana teixeira pinto: What we came to call the “political turn” is often associated with a re-evaluation of modernism. Kathrin Rhomberg, for instance, the curator of the Berlin Biennial of 2010, sought to rehabilitate realism in order to redefine the genealogy of modernity. This year’s Manifesta, “The Deep of the Modern”, tries to equate the history of industrial economic restructuring with modernist poetic restructuring...

amy balkin: If Kathrin Rhomberg is talking about the cracks in the project of modernity as related to the narrative of permanent growth, planning and capitalist expansion, you could say we will breathe the artifacts of these gaps in the future. Or more simply, people will bear the discontinuities as the bodily burdens of “what is there”—the impacts of environmental pollution and degradation—in a longer timeline, which might be another way to redefine modernity’s genealogy.

atp: ...and how would you place yourself regarding these narratives?

ab: My works emerge from the debris left by the history of industrial capitalism. The imperative of permanent economic growth was bound

up with the development of mass production via the eviction and reorganization of spaces for extraction through infrastructure, planning and architecture. Simultaneously, it produced new forms of labor, alienation and resistance, via political and labor organizing. My work, including *Public Smog*, involves political and physical spaces produced by capitalism that we may occupy in the future, and those we still inhabit from its lingering past.

atp: Do you also see “realism” as an ideologically loaded notion that still bears revisiting?

ab: I am interested in works of literary realism like *Bleak House*, for example, Dickens’s smoky fog of the “London Particular” standing in for the miasmatic functioning of the British legal system. But I’m also interested in how journalism and science fiction come together in the prefigurative. I consider myself indebted to Philip K. Dick in terms of his thinking about dueling futures, specifically coming out of a Northern California “Cold War” context.

atp: Can you briefly describe your approach and methods?

ab: My projects are often process-oriented, and I’m broadly concerned with questions of common pool resources and human relations, landscape and scale, spatial politics and data visualization. I seem to work slowly on a few projects that are ongoing. These have often been provoked by news stories I’ve read, combined with a site, and overlaid with a (loose) methodology, such as “to act geopolitically on the same scale a State does.” More practically, I try to conduct interviews and spend time at the places I’m concerned with, collecting field audio and images. As my understanding grows along the way, the strategy and tactics change, and the work is rephrased by this process.

atp: Your reference to Philip K. Dick made me think about how you map synchronicity in projects like *Invisible-5* (2006) or *A People’s Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2012). Do you see these narrative strategies as a counterpoint to the hegemony of corporate spatialization?

ab: I do see the work as counter-mapping, and about using geospatial tools to map forms and sites of political resistance, with the participation of people in places deemed peripheral or ultra-peripheral—spatially, and in terms of political power.

This page – Public Smog, 2006-2011. Courtesy: the artist

Opposite, top – Residents of Kettleman City, including Magdalena Romero, whose daughter America was born with a cleft palate in 2007, protest at US EPA Region 9 Offices in San Francisco for the shutdown of Chemical Waste Management Inc.'s Kettleman Hills Toxic Waste Facility, 2009

Opposite, middle-left – Protesters from Bayview Hunters Point rally with residents of Kettleman City at US EPA Region 9 Offices in San Francisco, California, 2009

Opposite, middle-right and bottom – Invisible-5, 2006, Amy Balkin, Kim Stringfellow, Tim Halbur, Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice, and Pond: Art, Activism & Ideas. Photo: Kim Stringfellow

Dear _____

I am interested in making a Tentative List submission of the earth's atmosphere for inscription on the World Heritage List, but was wondering how that would be possible, as I am an individual, not affiliated to a State Party or institution.

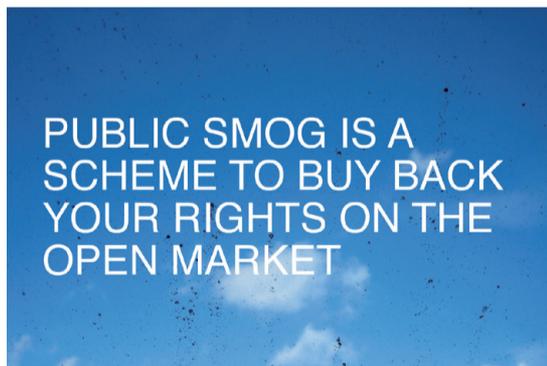
Does the fact that only State Parties may nominate properties, and that they may only nominate properties within their boundaries, prevent the atmosphere from nomination as UN World Heritage Site, as an extraterritorial/ transboundary system?

In theory, if one were to attempt to nominate the earth's atmosphere for addition to the World Heritage List, how would it be possible to submit it, as no State Party can nominate a fully extraterritorial property? Who could submit it?

Would it be more likely to fail as a submission for lack of a potential nominator, or as an extraterritorial system outside the purview of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee?

Last, do you know if there has there been any credible attempt, by any organization or within the international community, to designate protected environmental status for the earth's atmosphere as a whole system?

Any further suggested readings around similar case studies (protection of Antarctica, high seas, the Moon), policies in development, specialists working on this question, or names of organizations working towards this would be greatly appreciated.



atp: Are you also interested in the pre-subjective and in rendering it transparent?

ab: Yes, I'm influenced by how Philip K. Dick's characters build models or prefigurative spaces. These can be nostalgic, like Dick's "babylands" of the super-rich, who build and curate satellite demesnes to mimic a specific lost place and time of their childhood (e.g. Washington, D.C. in 1935), or the miniaturized "layouts" of off-world settlers forcibly evicted to colonize Mars, where a proxy experience of a day out in pre-climate change San Francisco is accessed through drug-enhanced "translation," but experientially structured by the interior decor of a miniature home layout.

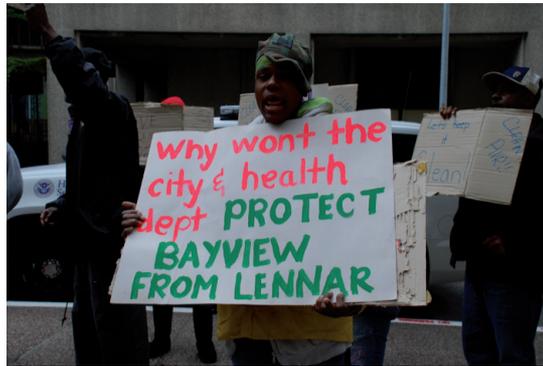
A model provides a vision to inhabit, whether for a desired political future or a nostalgic past, or some combination of these—a form of continuity. So the pre-subjective could be about the possible experience of a future loss of the familiar via climate change—familiar birds and plants,



landscapes or food, or the familiar in terms of ideas of shared spaces or notions of experiential commonality, whether as a park or some formulation for an equitably shared space. So perhaps the question for me would be about a commons as a way forward versus nostalgia for a kind of shared land and resource use that was historically situation-specific.

atp: I am thinking again about how you also use the word "smog" as a signifier for obscurity and how your work often revolves around the blind spots of the legal system...

ab: Smog has multiple readings, including as a signifier for a literal obscuring of vision, which



can stand in for the legal system, or for market boosterism and hubris. I suppose that's why Dickens found it such a useful literary device in *Bleak House*, although London lacked newer, more pervasive forms of obscurity like ABCs—atmospheric brown clouds.

atp: Your project *Invisible-5* also makes the environmental plight of poor communities along the I-5 route visible. Would you say that to make the invisible visible is the proper role of the political?

ab: It's a role of the political. I think the environmental conditions of these communities are usually visible and known to them. They have done the hard investigative work (often via their own ill-health) of uncovering how polluting industries have come to be situated in places that directly impact their health (such as waste incinerators, which produce dioxin), understanding how structural racism and class inequalities are implicated in zoning decisions, and learning how to organize and win both locally and in a socially-networked way. Many of the people we interviewed for *Invisible-5*, which was an environmental justice audio-tour of California's Interstate-5 freeway between San Francisco and Los Angeles (a collaboration between myself, the artists Kim Stringfellow and Tim Halbur, the organizations Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice, and POND: Art, activism, and ideas) were already self-taught activists, arising out of their personal experiences.

What *Invisible-5* does is to reframe what can be seen as a group of discreet local struggles onto an armature that reflects some of the broader social and spatial networks of the movements and places them against the historical context that produced these spaces and conditions. That is, to frame environmental justice struggles against the longer geopolitical history of California and set it into an accessible format for some audiences who were other than those involved in these struggles. So my response to your question about making the invisible visible is about audience—visible to whom and to what end? In the case of *Invisible-5* the role of the political is to make the already visible SEEN, to direct attention.

atp: It seems that gentrification and suburbanization play a large role in fragmenting the possibility of coherent political action...

ab: Many people living in low-income communities don't own land, so they are the first to be pushed out by more powerful interests. I'm not



sure that is the largest concern. Consider that in 2006 a half a million people marched in Los Angeles for immigration reform, yet it didn't happen. So there was a mass of people willing to represent themselves in public as a unified politicized movement in that moment. I also think you have to look at the militarized policing that happens now in the US, the use of unmanned drones, media harassment, sound weapons, etc. And the suppression of what's considered to be legal protest in the US, by the recent surveillance of Muslims in New York





Statisticgarden, Fresno, California, 2006. Courtesy: the artist

Opposite, top – Kettleman Says No: Environmental Justice Protests in Kettleman City, 1988

Opposite, bottom – Archival television news still of a protest from the historic and successful mobilization led by the Mothers of East Los Angeles to stop the siting of the Los Angeles City Energy Recovery (LANCER 1) project, a waste-to-energy incinerator, in East Los Angeles. Date unknown, between 1984-1986

Police Department, preemptive raids on peace marchers and the suppression of journalists. But I do agree that suppression of public speech (and its development in the first place) is spatial.

atp: The project *Public Smog*, which has the support of the dOCUMENTA (13), seems to be framed as a legal challenge to the concept of private property and common usage. Do I get it right?

ab: Yes, it's a defense of the atmosphere as commons, set against emissions trading as a new zone of privatization of a global public good. In this model of privatization, atmospheric gases are re-stated as emission derivatives, a new form of fictitious capital.

atp: Would you say climate policies in general, and carbon emissions trade in particular, are an extension of the old colonial order?

ab: Yes, or its continuation in the present. Climate change is also an opportunity to reinvigorate some of the power relations of colonialism, such as by unequal treaties between more and less powerful nations. *Public Smog* is concerned with "economic restructuring", including the reframing of the biogeochemical commons as "ecosys-

tem services" and the creation of new forms of indebtedness, such as the "structural adjustment" of the sky.

atp: Can you elaborate a bit on that?

ab: *Public Smog* was first opened through the activity of purchasing and withholding carbon credits from use in regulated emissions markets in the US and EU, opening parks over Southern California and the European Union. The first phase of *Public Smog* was concerned with the claims of market-based mechanisms (like cap-and-trade) to reduce carbon emissions and to slow climate change. These programs have been dangerous, as they have forestalled or replaced other solutions, whether direct reductions of climate-altering pollutants through command-and-control policies, or broader systems change.

Since 2010, in an effort to expand a clean-air park to include the entire atmosphere, I've worked with the institutional support of dOCUMENTA (13) to find a UNESCO State Party to lead an effort to include the earth's atmosphere on the UNESCO World Heritage List. I chose the World Heritage process because it's concerned with the intersection of tangible and intangible culture via "mixed natural and cultural sites", futurity, and the lan-

guage of universal value. So my attempt is to insert the Earth's Atmosphere on the World Heritage List as a protected area (or biospheric reserve, or atmospheric monument), acknowledging its universal value and its primacy to human continuity, as well as its impact on every other "Property" already included on the World Heritage List. As the atmosphere is a "Property" not contained within a "State's Party," and because it affects all "States' Parties," all signatories to the World Heritage Convention would have to support a nomination for it to succeed.

What will be shown at dOCUMENTA (13) will be the responses to this request. The Kingdom of Tonga has expressed interest in leading the effort, but it lacks the financial and administrative resources to do so. Their concern reflects the looming consequences for small island states of sea level rise, and their relative weakness in international climate negotiations.

During the exhibition, there will be a postcard petition for visitors to mail to their own governments, including Germany, urging the country to initiate an emergency nomination process. To this end, I've written an argument for the listing of the Earth's Atmosphere using the World Heritage Tentative list submission format.

