

Engaging with the Climate Emergency: An Interview with Amy Balkin

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Amy Balkin, *Smog Index* (2018-), IMG_6004
Sun's up in Zhengzhou China 2004.JPG.
Digital image contributed by Geoff Seaman.
Courtesy of the artist.

ENGAGING WITH THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY:

An Interview with Amy Balkin

By Aseman Sabet

IN HER CROSS-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION, AMERICAN ARTIST AMY BALKIN ADDRESSES OUR COMPLEX RELATIONS TO THE SOCIAL AND MATERIAL LANDSCAPES WE LIVE IN, WITH A STRONG FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, PUBLIC DOMAIN AND THE LAW. THIS INTERVIEW DISCUSSES BALKIN'S RECENT WORKS.



Amy Balkin et al., *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting (State: As of the run-up to COP26, Glasgow, Nov. 1-12, 2021)* (2012-). Courtesy of the artist.
Amy Balkin et al., *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2012-), New York (USA). Collection (Colburn, Henry). Courtesy of the Archive. Photo: Mary Lou Saxon.

RESOLUTION: RECOMMENDATION OF THE INITIATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY PROCESS TO NOMINATE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE FOR INSCRIPTION ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST

As a State Party to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, _____, "The Nation," submits its support for the nomination of Earth's Atmosphere for inscription on the World Heritage List,

Recognizing the outstanding universal value of Earth's Atmosphere, and responding to the formidable threats and risks to its integrity from greenhouse gases and other anthropogenic pollutants,

Considering the impacts of further damage to the atmosphere, to vulnerable biological systems on Earth, to biodiversity, and to humankind,

Finding it in the common interest to protect Earth's Atmosphere for present and future generations,

Acknowledging that its preservation is the duty of the entire international community,

Further recognizing the impact climate change will have on sites of natural and cultural heritage currently inscribed on the World Heritage List and on the future of all nations,

Acting as a committed partner, The Nation recommends the initiation of an extraordinary process for inscription of Earth's Atmosphere on the UNESCO World Heritage List, consistent with the aims and goals of the World Heritage Convention.

Amy Balkin, Resolution, Public Smog: Earth's Atmosphere as UNESCO World Heritage Preserve, dOCUMENTA (13). Part of Amy Balkin, *Public Smog* (2004-). Courtesy of the artist.

Aseman Sabet **In the last decade, your work has given a lot of space to participatory processes. We can observe this in *A People's Archive of Melting and Sinking* (2012-) and *Smog Index* (2018-), both driven by environmental issues. Among the many concerns you convey, is engaging the public in your projects also a way to call for political participation?**

Amy Balkin It's true, in *A People's Archive* or *Smog Index* you can see participatory processes that call for—or act as proxies for—political participation. That said, they also knowingly reflect and perform the potential and pitfalls of politically engaged art processes. But I do hope that for participants the request for engagement can critically intersect with their diverse interests, positions and entry points, such as in public group readings of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, or by contributing to *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* or to *Smog Index*.

In *A People's Archive* (a climate archive of the "anterior future," or "what will have been"), to participate invites a contributor's imaginative and practical efforts to confront the impacts of climate geopolitics on where they live. The archive began in 2012 with a call for objects contributed from the place where a contributor lives and has determined may or will become uninhabitable owing to sea level rise or other impacts of anthropogenic climate

change. To participate contributors are asked: 1) to assess the risk of climate impacts where they live in a timescale of their choosing, 2) to grapple with the present or future impacts of climate change and risk on their own potential losses where they live, 3) to see an opportunity for solidarity in the archive's organizing framework and circulation, 4) to engage in constructing a future for which an archive makes sense, given the social and existential risks posed by climate change, and finally, 5) to choose and send a contribution.

At the same time, the archive originates as an English-language project from the United States, a UNFCCC Annex I, II, B country, and circulates largely within the western contemporary art world. To date most contributions have also been from Annex II countries, and not from places with the greatest vulnerability to loss and damage from climate change, mirroring structural problems of climate change negotiation processes. Acknowledging these gaps, all contributions are framed with the UNFCCC State Party status of the country they were contributed from.

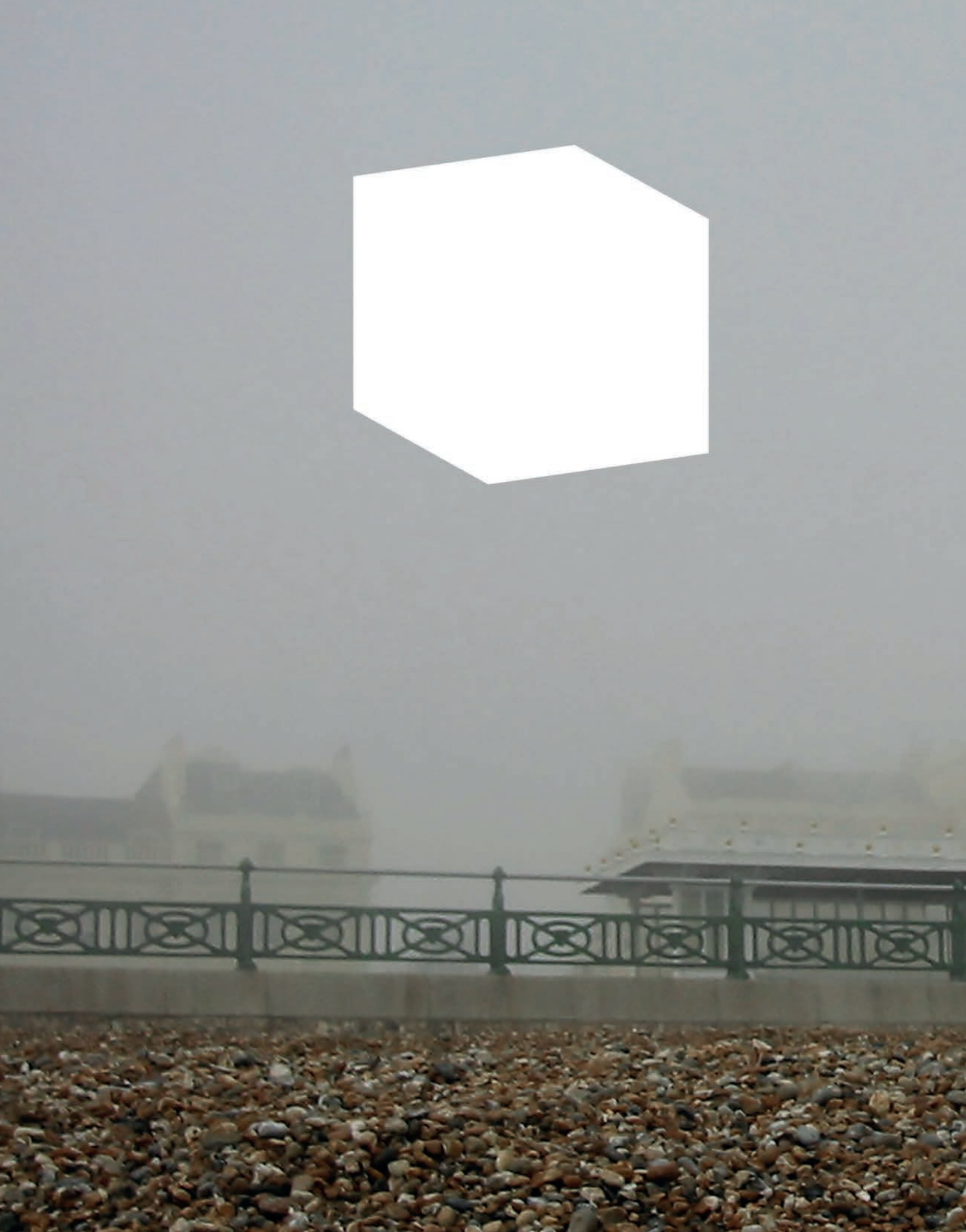
For *Smog Index*, a new photographic record of urban smog events, I'm working with curators at the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art to collect local images for the *Overview Effect*, which was delayed due to Covid-19. Participation in *Smog Index* is, in some ways, similar to *A People's Archive*; it also involves





PUBLIC SMOG OFFSETS
CLIMATE JUSTICE

The billboard features an aerial photograph of a port or industrial area with several large cargo ships docked at a pier. Numerous colorful shipping containers are stacked in the foreground. The text 'PUBLIC SMOG OFFSETS' is on the top line and 'CLIMATE JUSTICE' is on the bottom line, both in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The billboard is supported by two metal poles and is situated behind a white concrete wall. In the background, there are palm trees and a large, low-profile building under a cloudy sky.





soliciting documents of first-hand experience of environmental risk, exposure and degradation to create a collection of observations that will also deal with global experiences of smog and the photographic image. Belgrade has one of the highest levels of urban fine pm2.5 particulate pollution in Europe, so I'll be seeking participation of local activists and initiatives, photographers and others.

One of your earliest processual projects, *Public Smog* (2004–), offered a more direct political stance as it implied petitioning governments to act as a lead State Party to inscribe Earth's atmosphere on the World Heritage List. The work also benefited from partnerships with independent art organizations, academics and scientists, known and unknown traders from the US to Hungary, to name a few. How did all these exchanges come together throughout the years?

A.B. First, I should introduce *Public Smog*, which is an ongoing series of efforts to open a "clean air" park for public use through actions to prevent greenhouse or smog-forming gases from being emitted into the atmosphere. Activities to open the park have involved carbon markets and intergovernmental processes, in the context of their intertwined claims of primacy to ameliorate climate change. Over time, the varied processes to open the park have involved and benefitted from working formally and informally with a wide range of friendly and unfriendly collaborators and participants. These exchanges have contributed to opening the park in diverse ways—from the input of climate and atmospheric scientists Dr. Alexandra Thompson and Dr. Thomas Cahill to conceptualize the location of the park in the troposphere and stratosphere as lower and upper parks, and to calculate its size, mass and volume—to working with varied generous, anonymous, or hostile emissions traders asked to assist in the purchase of emission offsets.

Public Smog has also involved engagement, dialog and support from activists, varied publics and artworld participants. These include collaboration with curatorial students, such as with the Royal College of Art, to open *Public Smog* over the European Union, participation of overlapping projects such as Kate Rich's *Feral Trade* and the curatorial apparatus of Documenta13, including the over 100,000 visitors who signed a postcard petition asking governments to act as lead state party to inscribe Earth's atmosphere on the UNESCO World Heritage List on an emergency basis.

In 2009, you presented *Public Smog* in Douala, Cameroon, with a series of billboards that addressed climate change through a combination of slogans and local landscapes. What type of dialogue with the community emerged from this project, in a country that has specific environmental and economic challenges, and that since then has opted for a national climate change adaptation plan?

A.B. I worked on the billboards remotely from San Francisco with curator Benoit Mangin and photographer Guillaume Astaix, who took images of local skies in Douala. Astaix's images were superimposed with English or French texts, such as PUBLIC SMOG OFFSETS CLIMATE JUSTICE and PUBLIC SMOG CONDUIRA À LAJUSTEMENT STRUCTUREL DU CIEL.

I wasn't able to travel to Douala in person, but at the time I was introduced to Cameroon's links between the government's ownership of forests, private and illegal logging, climate-impacting deforestation, corruption and state violence. Beyond that, my entry to community dialog was what was published in the press. In the context of the exhibition *Villeurs du Monde 2*, Patient Ebwele wrote about *Public Smog* in *Le Jour Quotidien*, where he described the billboards' "vitriolic" critique of the multinationals, subject matter of the commodification of the commons, and the problems of international law, property and pollution, and explained emissions trading and the Clean Development Mechanism. His article concluded with the need for addressing Cameroon's environment and its stakes, and a description of the transformation of the environment to a site for "discussion, strategies, and action," which I read as a call to action.

Wanting to know more about Ebwele, I learned from an Amnesty International report that three years previously he'd been beaten and detained for his journalism at Radio Equinoxe. This provided my first insight into the political risks for journalists working in Cameroon and to freedom of expression. So, in that context, while not emerging from a community dialog, perhaps the project's combination of literal high visibility and remote authorship provided a soft entry point for critical journalism in support of activist environmental strategies. This is purely my own, and again remote, reading. Since that time, illegal logging and further deforestation of the Congo Basin have continued, along with growing local consequences of climate change that include drought, sea level rise and urban heat waves. In that context, it seems reasonable to hope the National Adaptation Plan, as well as Cameroon's participation in the Kigali Declaration on Forest Landscape Restoration in Africa, both meet with success.

Most of your work has a strong instructive component in relation to environmental data. Is this aspect of your practice a way to act on information asymmetry?

A.B. It's true, I'm very interested in data, public speech and information asymmetry, especially regarding political ecology and spatial politics. My interest is informed by radical geography and I understand it as operating in the legacy of artists like Hans Haacke. Although I work differently, I'm also attentive to the collaborative, investigatory, interpretative and activist approaches of groups like Forensic Architecture and The Natural History Museum.

I do see many of my projects as aligned with radical geography's work towards spatial justice, such as *Invisible-5*, a collaboration that connected oral histories of environmental racism along the I-5 freeway corridor in California from the perspective

of grassroots environmental justice activists and others. In *Invisible-5*, some interviewees describe their own experiences of information asymmetry in political processes, as in Mary Lou Mares story of people needing Spanish translation at a public meeting for a hazardous waste dump expansion in Kettleman City, California, being sent to the back of the room.

Projects like the ongoing series *Reading the IPCC* have been attempts to engage directly with the exclusionary processes and language of the climate conference process, through inviting participation in public readings of climate assessment reports and policymaker summaries, bringing participants together from a wide variety of experiences, whether as durational readings in public places, or as interstitial readings between conference speakers.

The process of bringing emissions trading to open *Public Smog* also produced opportunities to make internal materials public, such as a 2004 XML spreadsheet showing the entry of speculative entities like Cantor Fitzgerald Brokerage into emissions trading markets, which was exhibited as a wall-sized installation, or *Cc: Advice on the new Trading Accounts, ETETRegistryHELP non suppressed recipient list*, which I republished in Amy Howden-Chapman's art-climate-action journal *The Distance Plan* (2013).

Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the way governments deal with climate change? And do you have a sense of how this will affect—or is already affecting—your work?

A.B. I would hope so, the connection between climate change and emerging pandemic diseases is highly documented, and the stakes of a lack of collaboration and common cause are in stark relief. And like climate change's slow violence, COVID-19 has reflected and driven inequity in exposure, illness and death. But I don't think this crisis will alter the path of capitalist extractivism, so how governments deal with the climate emergency will continue to be driven by action from social and grassroots movements.

But my work has been affected by COVID-19's curatorial turn, as well as the practical and ethical requirements to engage in participatory projects safely during the pandemic. As COVID-19 has reoriented, at least in this moment, questions about political ecology, environmental racism, climate justice and the Anthropocene, there's interest in my work that overlaps these concerns. So, I'm working with the Talbot Rice Gallery to safely invite contributions to a Scotland Collection for *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* during an ongoing lockdown for *The Normal*, curated "in response to the 'wake-up call' of COVID-19." And I'm developing *Smog Index*, a participatory global reflection on the embodied dangers of smog at a moment that breath, air pollution, public health and equity have risen together in public discourse, and as convergent factors for COVID-19 health outcomes, in Belgrade, a city with high death rates attributed to fine particle pollution, in the context of a coronavirus surge and new lockdown.

AMY BALKIN's ongoing work involves land and the atmosphere, and the geopolitical relationships that frame them. Upcoming exhibitions include *The Vienna Biennale for Change* at MAK, *Overview Effect* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, and *The Normal* at Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. Her work has been published in *Decolonizing Nature* by TJ Demos (Sternberg), *Materiality* (Whitechapel/MIT), and *Critical Landscapes* (UC Press). She is the 2020-2021 artist-in-residence at the Penn Program in the Environmental Humanities (PPEH).

ASEMAN SABET is an art historian and a lecturer at Université du Québec à Montréal. She also works as an independent curator and associate editor for *ESPACE art actuel*. Her research explores sensorial studies as well as the confluence of contemporary art and science. Her most recent exhibition projects include *Through the Forest* (2018), the first in a series of three carte blanche invitations from MAC LAU, focusing on intersecting epistemologies and representations of nature and history, and *The New States of Being* (2019), presented at CEUM and developed in collaboration with Harvard's Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology and Bioethics.