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Public Smog (2004-ongoing), by Amy Balkin et al.

Public Smog is a "clean-air" park in the atmosphere that fluctuates in location and scale. The park is constructed through financial, legal, or political activities that open it for public use. Activities to open Public Smog have included the purchase and retiring emissions offsets (NOX and CO2) in regulated emissions schemes in the US and European Union, making them inaccessible to polluting industries.

This activity resulted in the opening of parks above Southern California (June 2004), the European Union (2006-7), and the United States (2010). When Public Smog is built through this process, it exists in the unfixed public airspace above the region where offsets are purchased and withheld from use. The park's size varies, reflecting the amount of emissions allowances purchased and the length of the contract. Other activities to create Public Smog impact the size, location, and duration of the park.

The work is currently focused on building a larger, permanent atmospheric preserve through an effort to inscribe Earth's Atmosphere on the UNESCO World Heritage List, begun in 2006, but developed more fully in collaboration with Documenta (13) since 2010. This undertaking has involved an invitation first presented to Germany, then to all UNESCO States Parties, to act as lead State Party in initiating an extraordinary nomination process for inscription of Earth's atmosphere. With the exception of the Kingdom of Tonga, no reply of interest was received, so a petition was launched from within the exhibition, requesting the audience to further petition their respective governments via signed postcard. Over 100,000 audience-participants supported this call while the exhibition was open. However, the outcome of this activity is uncertain.

Other activities to articulate Public Smog have included a climate-futuring breakfast (2006), and a series of thirty billboards presented across Douala, Cameroon in 2009, prefiguring the benefits, complications, and implications of enacting Public Smog over Africa. The cover image, by curator Benoît Mangin, documents this iteration of the work.

In addition to activities that open Public Smog, the work attempts to examine and enact a response to the increasing impacts on the climate system from anthropogenic activities. It is also concerned with the politics of participation, particularly around claims of markets and states to act on behalf of local and global publics to mitigate the impacts of climate change. To this end, the project has involved a growing group of interdisciplinary participants and advisors, including climate scientist Dr. Alexandra Thompson. A full credit list is online at publicsmog.org.

Amy Balkin

(photograph by Benoît Mangin)