

What Will Have Been: Interviews on *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting*
Dana Kopel

Amy Balkin's A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting is an ongoing project in which Balkin invites people living in places that may disappear because of climate change to contribute items from those places. Combined, they suggest the physical, political and economic implications of climate change. The archive is available online at www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com; it has been exhibited at Ballroom Marfa, Texas, and is currently presented at the Museum für Neue Kunst Freiburg, Germany.

In your interview with Ana Teixeira Pinto, in Mousse, you say that your work "emerges from the debris left by the history of industrial capitalism." The objects in the Archive are literally this "debris" – the little things that are left behind in the wake of industrial capitalism and the environmental destruction it has caused. These things seem to function both as emblems of the capitalist cycle of production and destruction, and as testaments to that destruction, almost like memorials. How would you describe your relation to objects and their meanings in the work?

While it's productive to consider the objects in the archive as testaments to the destructive wake of industrial capitalism, as debris, or flotsam and jetsam, I consider the collections more akin to public displays of evidence, or as proxies for political consciousness. Although I'm interested in the potential for contributions to stand in for the recognition of the stakes by their contributors, the exposure of individual participants to the economic and political impacts of climate change varies greatly, so that shouldn't be generalized.

At this early point, the archive looks broadly to the *People's Museum* in Birzeit, Palestine, a museum of self-representation based on contributions collected through dialogue, and to the *Donora Smog Museum* in Pennsylvania. Both are community-oriented archives functioning in diverse ways in response to (very different) aftermaths. The *Donora Smog Museum* is a storefront that houses materials about a deadly 1948 inversion smog that trapped air pollution from U.S. Steel's Zinc Works and American Steel & Wire, sickening and killing residents there. The aftermath sparked the clean-air movement in the United States, and led to the first Air Pollution Control Act of 1955.

My relation to the objects is still to be determined, and is not unproblematic. One role, beyond initiating the archive, is to find an approach for organizing the contributions to reflect how climate politics act upon the states, communities, and sites from where contributions have been sent. I'm attempting to do this using the language of 'common but differentiated' collections, referring to the UNFCCC's phrasing of 'common but differentiated responsibility' which suggests that (Annex I) countries should lead in combating climate change, since they have most contributed to and benefited from the emission of carbon and other greenhouse gases. I hope to repurpose this language to display the political gulf between the rhetoric and the entrenchment of climate-related realpolitik, including the inequitable exposure to climate-related losses for diverse communities both outside of and within Annex I countries.

I want to push slightly further the idea that your relation to the objects in the Archive is “not unproblematic”: certainly, within the context of the work, the objects function primarily as testaments to the destruction wrought by industrial capitalism, yet the act of displaying them is never entirely free of a certain fetishization of the object inherent to the processes of capitalism. How do you see this complication playing out in the work?

The conditions of possibility that allowed the Archive to be proposed, produced and distributed are the byproducts of 150 years of industrial capitalism. Writing on May 12, 2013, as global carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has reached the unavowed milestone of 400 parts per million, this project certainly raises questions for me about the relevance of historical and current models of cultural representation, presentation, and preservation in the face of climate change—for what future, and for whom of its imagined subjects things are preserved.

As hundreds of millions of people are likely to be displaced in the near future, pushed into further precarity and amplified state violence, perhaps the *Archive* and its objects may be better read as a time capsule from a moment when grave mistakes were made.

You specify that the object doesn't have to originate from somewhere affected by climate change, it just has to be there – this acknowledgment of movement or migration parallels global capitalism in a broad sense, but also, more specifically, the impending migrations of people (like Maldivians) whose homes may soon disappear as a result of climate change. Could you talk a bit about the Archive in relation to migration and placelessness, to people and things that exist in some ways apart from a particular State?

The collections and things that comprise them are intended to form a record of the future anterior, or what will have been, prefiguring foreseen or predicted disappearance and related displacements, migrations, and relocations that may, will, or already are taking place. There is a chance, however, depending on the scenario, that some places represented in the archive won't disappear after all, so the migrations and associated losses the objects mark may not come to pass. However, for some the pressure to move is already happening, as in Kivalina, Alaska, where erosion is making it difficult for people to remain without an evacuation route.

If adaptive migration is humanity's great success, I'm not sure how to make sense of a quickly approaching future when potentially large swaths of humanity who must migrate to survive will be prevented from doing so, or diverted towards politically produced placelessness – pushed into refugee camps, politically hostile situations, or out to sea – and for inhabitants of low-lying island nations like Maldives or Nauru, faced with the absolute loss of the possibility of return.

Like some of your other works, A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting involves the creation of a sort of commons, a global network of the shared experience of environmental destruction; yet the work also emphasizes the particular, individual objects and their particular meanings for the people who contribute.

The work does emphasize the specific, individual objects, and is concerned with the relative assignment of value—to people, to things, to cultures, to places—taking in the recognized and unrecognized, the found and the made, the worker and the produced, etc. It's also concerned with

the material qualities of the contributions: what will disappear, what will or can be saved, and what will be left to 'loss and damage' from unmitigated and unadapted climate impacts.

Some of the contributors live where their objects come from, and some have been in those places temporarily. A pair of steel crampons was sent from Palmer Station, Anvers Island, Antarctica. There are no permanent inhabitants there, so it was contributed by an American worker who overwintered there.

How do you balance concerns for the specific/small-scale and for the large-scale/commons in regard to environmental destruction? Perhaps you could expand on the ways in which the archive functions simultaneously on both local/personal and global levels – especially in relation to Cassie's observation that the contributions reflect global inequalities in terms of participation and self-representation.

Ecosystems have biogeochemical cycles (water, carbon, etc.) that move between scales and states. In a project like the *Archive*, the specificity and texture of the materials cycle between standing in for local political, cultural, and environmental aftermaths, and for large-scale losses from failures to protect the global commons.

The project is an example of how produced things - both found and made - are circulated or not, by whom, and in what narrative framework. Pointing to this stratification is one reason the archive uses the UNFCCC Annex Party designations as a map key for differentiating the collections. While many of the contributions come from political and economic peripheries, such as UNFCCC Least Developed Countries (LDCS) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the archive has so far been presented only in Annex I and II countries (the United States and Germany).

While the contributions are reflective of unequal political relationships, beyond the problems around cross-cultural storytelling, international activism, and non-governmental organizations, I hope the collaborative contributions speak modestly to opportunities for mutual support in current international climate justice activism, such as between Oilwatch International, La Via Campesina, and Climate Justice Now! in their recent co-opposition to REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries), and the potential for united front organizing, despite disparate localized situations.

Your work seems to operate somewhere between art and activism – in a way, projects like A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting, Public Smog, and This is the Public Domain function fully as both. How do you navigate the distinction (if you choose to recognize it) between art and activism in your practice?

Some of my projects, like the collaboration *Invisible-5*, support activism. Others are in solidarity with, visualize, or enact a future I hope to inhabit, and some have other relationships to activism and art. *A Peoples Archive* is intended to support cultural equity and self-representation, whether it circulates in community contexts or in traditional sites of art reception. In the archive, the objects are artifacts of a decision to participate by contributing, based on a self-chosen willingness to foresee or make sense of a difficult, highly individualized experience of present or

potential loss, a position that's cultural, spatial, and political. I hope the archive also speaks to the possibility of solidarity and political organizing across diverse situations. However, I most hope the climate scenario the archive is being developed for doesn't come to pass, and support climate justice activism to mitigate that future.

Do you think art has a responsibility to engage with the political, to draw attention to the privileges and abuses of institutional power?

As Jenny Holzer said "Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise." But I hope a project like the archive speaks to the income inequality and political exclusion of people who are in places most likely to disappear, whether in the Republic of Maldives, Tuvalu, or Kivalina, Alaska.

Cassie Thornton is an artist and a co-registrar of A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting.

What kinds of patterns or relationships have you noticed emerging between objects in the archives, and the places they're sent from?

I think the most striking relationships in the Archive are between the contributor and the place where the object was found. Two main categories have emerged. There are contributions from a citizen or resident of the place from where the contributions are from, like the several sheets of stamps submitted with enthusiasm by Mr. F Panisi directly from Tuvalu Philatelic Bureau, whom we contacted over email. The remainder of the collection is from visitors or tourists who made contributions on behalf of a place during a temporary stay there. There are exceptions to these two categories, like the bag of tourist pamphlets submitted by a woman at the front desk of the United Nations office to the Mission of Nepal, whom I dropped in on and solicited for a contribution.

I think that the first two types of relationships mentioned are important to discuss – not as a way to condemn our work and its relationship to colonialism, but as a way to complicate what the project represents. The way that the contributions arrived, and who participates in a project like this, tells a story of colonialism that goes much deeper than that of unethical acquisitions of cultural artifacts for study or display. While this way of gathering is not idealistic, it represents a truth, and acts in itself as an artifact of a deeper colonialist assumption of power and ownership by industrialized countries. The contemporary and historical performance of land ‘ownership’ by wealthy countries who damage environments far outside of their own boundaries represents what David Harvey would call accumulation by dispossession, or possession of wealth and power by a few through the dispossession of public wealth or land.

I think that the ethical issues in the sourcing of artifacts for this project are challenging because residents of places economically damaged by history and/or environmental degradation are unable to participate in the conversation proposed by the project – this may be due to a lack of access, education, or desire. The result is that many of our contributions speak on behalf of its relative place of origin, but without necessarily representing the people who live there, their awareness or opinion. The lack of voice from certain ‘developing countries’, ‘emerging economies’, ‘third world nations,’ etc., is an important representation of the many symptoms that are caused by the same forces that can be credited for all the sinking and melting action.

In her interview with Ana Teixeira Pinto, in Mousse, Amy says that her work "emerges from the debris left by the history of industrial capitalism." The objects in the Archive are literally this "debris" – the little things that are left behind in the wake of industrial capitalism and the environmental destruction it has caused. These things seem to function both as emblems of the capitalist cycle of production and destruction, and as testaments to that destruction, almost like memorials. How would you describe your relation to objects and their meanings in the work?

I agree with Amy about how these objects are debris of our industrial culture. I would add a possible alternative to the suggested commemorative terminology like memorials or emblems—what if the artifacts are ‘byproduct’ of another (or several) industrial processes? Simply put, byproduct is not the primary product or service being produced. The primary process that the

objects refer to in the archive is not articulated for the viewer or participant, but I see it as capitalist accumulation or environmental destruction. I think this term, byproduct, is useful because it formalizes the relationship between the objects and their common origins.

I also enjoy the use of revaluation inherent in the term as well as the form of the archive – byproduct can be useful and marketable or it can be considered waste. By re-contextualizing the byproducts as an archive, they are repurposed and revalued as artifacts with the ability to communicate about the primary process that created them.

Just for background, my interest in this term came when, as a recent MFA student at a private art school, I was concerned that the student body was primarily contributing to a system of debt accumulation, and that our art was a byproduct of that process. This gave me the ability to uncover an invisible primary process by studying the secondary products.

How do you navigate the distinction (if you choose to recognize it) between art and activism in A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting and in your own practice? Do you think art has a responsibility to engage with the political, to draw attention to the privileges and abuses of institutional power?

Art has no responsibilities – I hope for it to be anything but goal oriented or productive – but I love when it becomes a tool for revealing what we are moving too quickly to see.

I partially addressed this question in my response about the relationship between contributors and the artifact's origins. I find that contributions from non-residents illustrate very important issues, as described above, wherein residents of sinking and melting places are not speaking for themselves. I don't think that this aspect of the project is or should be idealistic, but it does reveal various issues associated with cross-cultural storytelling and international activism. As art, the project does not attempt to act on these issues.

I appreciate art that reveals complexities and that changes the boundaries of the issue it interrogates – meaning that it does not oversimplify or flatten, but adds dimension and opens up possibilities for reinterpretation of what is real and or true about an issue. I don't identify as an activist, though I work within specific issues, because I desire the freedom to develop deep and abstract research about systems (like debt and security) without the expectation of fixing something. It is most important to me that people develop long-term multi-modal understanding without feeling any pressure to create 'results' – I believe that my/our attention and time is a commodity that should be removed from the cycle of capitalist accumulation, and I want to have (and help others have) ideas that escape expectations of efficiency, utilitarianism, or profitability.

For me, the archive is best understood as art. I find that the fluid methods of gathering contributions as well as the evolving principals that organize the collection make the project deeply explorative, but not at all concrete or prescriptive, which makes a call to action difficult. The participation or non-participation in the growth of the archive contributes to the growing narrative of the archive. The difficulty of getting contributions from the most afflicted areas is in itself a contribution of information about the global economy.

Jelena Adeli, contributor – Cape Verde

Do you live where the object came from? If not, what is your relation to that place?

I was living in Cape Verde, on the islands of Santiago and Boa Vista, from 2010 to 2012. I was there doing research for my PhD, which is about the perceptions of climate change in Cape Verde.

What have you seen disappear there, environmentally or otherwise? What do those disappearances mean?

Water shortages and coastal erosion are the main consequences of climate change in Cape Verde. Among fishermen, there is a strong perception that fish resources have been greatly reduced. Rains are stronger but also less frequent. With the loss of beaches, there is a consequent loss of species like sea turtles, but these phenomena are also caused by human practices.

These disappearances have different meanings: Cape Verdean fishermen and farmers associate the disappearance of fish or rain mostly with spiritual or religious causes, as an ending or transformation of the world.

What's your relationship to the object(s) you contributed?

Tuna is one of the most popular fish in Cape Verde. If not eaten fresh, it is canned by one of the few local industries in Cape Verde. It was one of my favorite foods there. The tuna can symbolizes the enduring traditional practice of fishing in Cape Verde, as well as its canning industry, which has declined. It is also an object that is being used beyond its original purpose: as a plate during fishermen's barbeques at the beach, as an ashtray, or as a form of art.

Why did you contribute to the archive? What do you hope for your contribution, and the archive generally, to change or draw attention to?

Objects display how we relate to a certain place and its phenomena; the objects in the archive are local perspectives on place and disappearance. As my research shows, climate change is perceived in quite different ways in Cape Verde. I hope the archive will present these perspectives and offer new insights.

Tyler Henry, contributor – Brooklyn, NY, US

Do you live where the object came from? If not, what is your relation to that place?

The objects were collected from my art studio in the basement of Smack Mellon, near the waterfront of the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The studios were flooded with six feet of grey water from the East River during Superstorm Sandy.

What have you seen disappear there, environmentally or otherwise? What do those disappearances mean?

The most personal disappearance was of course the loss of my studio space and most of its contents; the space was demolished along with much of my work, my equipment and supplies, and many of the odd items I had collected and kept there, including over a hundred books. The surrounding neighborhood was also heavily affected – apartments were destroyed and a few nearby businesses have closed due to the damage. On the other hand, DUMBO has been lately undergoing a rapid surge of construction and I have been surprised to see that trend continue practically unabated since the storm. I think many of us understand that this sort of cataclysm can and likely will happen again, possibly soon – and there is a newfound anxiety and sense of impermanence that belies the local “march of progress.”

What's your relationship to the object(s) you contributed?

Queen VHS – This tape was a gift from a friend who had himself received it as a gift from an old girlfriend, who had bought it at a yard sale - so it has had a long life and has passed through many VCRs in its time. This kind of long-term physical sharing is a rarity now eclipsed by the virtual immediacy of the internet; the tape's obsolescence made it all the more valuable to me.

Kodachrome Film Box – I bought a big, tangled collection of 8mm and 16mm home movies from the 50's and 60's at a flea market when I was living in Philadelphia. All of the films were from an African-American family from the area – weddings, birthdays, roadtrips... a whole family history was contained in these rolls. I think that the writing on the box is pricing from when the film was processed. I have kept the films since the storm, despite the damage caused to them by water and mold.

35mm Slide – I work a lot with cameras now, and this slide was from a presentation I gave on André Kertész for the first photography class I took in college. I shot the slide from a book on his work.

Film Reel – This is an old film reel that came with a 16mm projector I bought years ago that was destroyed in the flood.

Why did you contribute to the archive? What do you hope for your contribution, and the archive generally, to change or draw attention to?

The power of the storm and the flooding felt almost mythological at the time. Overnight, environmental change went from a concept I thought I understood to a reality that affected my livelihood, my day-to-day life and my creativity. I feel that some of the personal nostalgia of the items I have contributed has been reclaimed and reshaped by the Earth, and that transformational power is evident in the context of this archive. I hope that the archive adds a new chapter to the stories of these objects and draws attention to the imminent, interpersonal effects of our changing climate.

Micaela Neus, contributor – Antarctica

Do you live where the object came from? If not, what is your relation to that place?

No one lives in Antarctica, but many people work there for months and even a year or two at a time. I went as most people who stay on-continent do – in the role of a worker who provides labor and logistical support to scientific research teams.

What have you seen disappear there, environmentally or otherwise? What do those disappearances mean?

Every day sees a little loss, if you know how to measure it. Some of my co-workers remember when the sea ice grew so thick every winter, they could ski out to neighboring islands on their day off. Others have to spend hours chipping away ice-melt from under buildings because the snow pack actually thawed enough to flow as water into the wrong places before refreezing. That's what we see as workers. The scientists say the same things except they get grants and make graphs.

What's your relationship to the object(s) you contributed?

These objects come from daily life around the station; they are things commonly encountered by workers and scientists alike. None of the objects were "mine" in the conventional sense, and yet they were because so much of our living is communal by necessity. These particular objects would otherwise have been discarded but the same goes for their replacements.

Why did you contribute to the archive? What do you hope for your contribution, and the archive generally, to change or draw attention to?

I wanted to show the world that we have a community down here. Antarctica is not a pile of ice that will melt or not melt at some faster or slower rate. Well, it is... and it's a human community as well, inhabited by people who love the place and one another even if that looks different here than in other parts of the world. Most people will never get to visit us and the archive is a way to visit them instead.

RUBARB, contributors – New Orleans, LA, USA

RUBARB is a youth-friendly community bike shop in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Do you live where the object came from?

(Some kids do; others have moved since last year. They all have family in the neighborhood.)

What have you seen disappear there, environmentally or otherwise?

Houses and businesses.

Why did you contribute to the archive?

So people know what was left after the storm came.

Léo Sexer, Rodrigo Olvera & Caroline Tripet, contributors – Mexico City, MX

Do you live where the object came from? If not, what is your relation to that place?

Rodrigo Olvera lives near the lake from which the objects are taken, in a suburb of Mexico City. Léo Sexer and Caroline Tripet (from France and Switzerland, respectively) came to know the lake thanks to Rodrigo.

What have you seen disappear there, environmentally or otherwise? What do those disappearances mean?

We've seen the disappearance of native vegetation caused by contamination of the soils, as well as the death of fish and birds caused by poor water quality and the heavy presence of plastic around the lake. These disappearances signify the loss of a natural reserve and some of its endemic species.

Will where you live disappear? Has it happened?

The water level has gone down more and more dramatically these last years. Furthermore, some people are extracting water illegally from the lake in order to build new houses in the area. It is highly probable that if nothing is done to stop it, this place will disappear.

What's your relationship to the object(s) you contributed?

This object, as many others, arrived via the river running from the place where Rodrigo lives to the lake. We thought that it would be interesting to take this object that would be like a synthesis of the stakes and of the seriousness of the problem.

Why did you contribute to the archive? What do you hope for your contribution, and the archive generally, to change or draw attention to?

It is important to speak about climate change not as an event isolated from our lives, but as a process that takes place through little negative contributions that can still be changed, through small changes in consumption.

Do you have specific political demands because of your situation? What do people need to know?

Local politics needs to address this problem: ceasing to pour contaminated water into the lake, stopping the massive arrival of trash into it, and preventing building contractors from taking water from it. It is a question of politics, but first local inhabitants need to be aware of and take responsibility for the problem, since it's their own rubbish that is being poured into the lake.

Christine Shearer, contributor – Kivalina, Alaska, US

Do you live where the object came from? If not, what is your relation to that place?

No. I visited Kivalina, Alaska, in August 2008, after I heard about the lawsuit that residents had filed against fossil fuel companies for damaging their homeland and creating a false debate about climate change science. I knew from the lawsuit that the people of Kivalina needed to relocate, but thought the date was far off. When I got to the tiny barrier reef island, however, I realized they were already in a dangerous situation, hit by fall storms that eroded the coastline up to peoples' homes, without any real road to evacuate and no U.S. policies for relocation. That is when it hit me: climate change is here, Kivalina is already dealing with it, and we as a society are totally unprepared, to their immediate detriment.

What have you seen disappear there, environmentally or otherwise? What do those disappearances mean?

I went in 2008 during the middle of a seawall project. The Army Corps and federal contractors were working to extend and nourish the eroding coastline. If you walked along the coastline, it was like marsh, and at the time it was lined with sandbags for protection. The seawall has since been finished and has extended the life of the island, but the island will go, that is inevitable.

What's your relationship to the object(s) you contributed?

I purchased the carved whale vertebrae from a resident of Kivalina, an artist named Russell Adams Jr. The people there are primarily Inupiat and have lived in the area thousands of years through subsistence; hunting bowhead whale is a large part of that tradition and culture.

Why did you contribute to the archive? What do you hope for your contribution, and the archive generally, to change or draw attention to?

I contributed because I think climate change is the single greatest issue facing humanity right now. Already we are seeing Inuit populations losing an entire way of life, because of global warming's radical effects on the Arctic. This is the beginning, and we need to pay attention, and feel, and act, before the only option becomes reacting to the inevitable.