

the air we breathe

Christina Battle



Cover image

Christina Battle, *the air we breathe*, video still, 2023

Christina Battle is an artist based in amiskwacîwâskahikan, (also known as Edmonton, Alberta), within the Aspen Parkland: the transition zone where prairie and forest meet. Her practice focuses on thinking deeply about the concept of disaster: its complexity, and the intricacies that are entwined within it. Much of this work extends from her recent PhD dissertation (2020) which looked closer to community responses to disaster: the ways in which they take shape, and especially to how online models might help to frame and strengthen such response.

Nadia Kurd is a curator and art historian based in Edmonton. She has special interests in arts advocacy, contemporary Islamic art and architecture as well as Indigenous visual culture from North America. In recognition of her work, she was awarded the Northwestern Ontario Visionary Award in 2014 and CCMW's Women Who Inspire Award in 2016. She was the recipient of the 2017 Hamad bin Khalifa Symposium on Islamic Art Fellowship and the 2018 Arts-Writer in Residence at the Banff International Curatorial Institute. Nadia is currently the Curator of the University of Alberta Museums Art Collection.

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Gauging The Air We Breathe with Christina Battle

By Nadia Kurd

*We will tell them we can see the air
We will tell them green turned brown and grey
We will tell them green covered the earth
We will tell them of where people
cannot hold their breath forever*

- "We will tell them of our dominion" by Terese Mason Pierre ¹

Over the summer of 2022, multidisciplinary artist Christina Battle engaged six individuals across the city of Edmonton to observe and record the changes to the atmosphere. Through a series of weekly prompts and written observations that spurred a four-week creative postcard exchange between participants, what immediately became clear was that all was not as it seemed: the regional air quality was significantly impacted by the growing effects of climate change as well as the oil refineries on the eastern edges of the city. While on most days these changes were often imperceptible, as the summer progressed and the wildfires burned in Jasper National Park, the air grew dense with fine particulate matter and smoke.

The wildfire haze that would go on to blanket Edmonton was a familiar one; over the past decade, the occurrence of extreme fire weather across western Canada have been frequent and primarily caused by the decrease in atmospheric humidity coupled with rising temperatures. Three of the last five fire seasons in British Columbia for example, have been the worst on record.² While this knowledge has been part of a growing body of evidence on the effects of climate change, the fight to protect the natural world across Canada has faced continued opposition and even militarized responses.³

the air we breathe is a project that seriously brings together and analyzes the data on the air quality in central Alberta. Under Battle's guidance, participants not only gathered information on the atmosphere, but were also prompted to recall the scents that have shaped their memories.

In turn, Battle weaves the patterns of this information into the experimental documentary video and textile installation works found in the exhibition. The knowledge exchange that has generated this exhibition calls attention to not only the growing impact of air pollution, but also the inequalities as a result of this pollution. In her detailed weekly prompts, Battle invited participants to think about the ways in which "these effects are gendered and racialized: toxins increase breast cancer risk and disproportionately affect women's reproductive health" and that, "activism around asthma and other threats to children's health in the United States tends to be led by Black and brown mothers."⁴ Such grounding information also illustrates how the fight for social justice continues to be the work of the most marginalized in so-called western liberal democracies.

In their book *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021), scientist Max Liboiron writes that pollution today is grounded in colonial land relations that assume "access by settler and colonial projects to Indigenous lands for settler and colonial goals"—which leads to bad relations and contributes to "a scientific theory that allows some amount of pollution to occur and its accompanying entitlement to Land to assimilate that pollution."⁵ At the heart of *the air we breathe* is an examination of the unethical nature of these relationships and how we can reclaim our agency by understanding how they work. Battle reads across disciplines, images and creative practices to highlight how we come to know about pollution and in doing so, shows the possibilities, as scholar Katherine McKittrick notes, for "the sharing of ideas (no beginnings, no ends) enables a terrain of struggle, through which different futures are imaged."⁶

The potential to collectively share and imagine alternate futures in the time of an urgent climate crisis is one way to challenge the entrenched norms of settler colonialism. For the educator and abolitionist Mariame Kaba, the key to reclaiming agency is grounding one's hope in living in and being of this world—in her words, "Hope is a Discipline"—making long view where hope "doesn't preclude feeling

1 Terese Mason Pierre, "We will tell them of our dominion," *Watch Your Head: Writers and Artists Respond to the Climate Crisis* (Coach House Books: Toronto, Ontario, 2020), 21.

2 Michael Brown, "Eight worst wildfire weather years on record happened in the last decade: study," *Folio*, 25 November 2021, <https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2021/11/eight-worst-wildfire-weather-years-on-record-happened-in-the-last-decade-study.html>.

3 Such militarized responses can be seen in recent events such as the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Reservation and the protests against Coastal GasLink pipeline in British Columbia among other social justice protests such as the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson (MO).

4 Christina Battle, "Week Two Prompt," *the air we breathe*, 2022.

sadness or frustration” but one that believes in the potential for transformation or change, no matter how large or small our engagement is with our designated community.⁷ Kaba’s philosophy parallels the approach taken by Battle in *the air we breathe*. What started as a small exchange between participants over the summer is expanded upon in the exhibition—a public space where people may come together and reflect. Here, the data on pollution can become more tangible, ultimately showing how it has become normalized in our daily lives.

In addition to exploring how pollution has become accepted to varying degrees, the exhibition also builds upon the collaborative exchange that originated in Edmonton. A significant part of *the air we breathe* is how Battle provides opportunities for a broader group of visitors to participate and think through the impacts of pollution both in Canada and across the globe. For example, in the central video, a voice-over teases apart the impacts of air pollution on both physical and mental health. Weaving threads across the social, political and environmental impacts of the crisis, the narration centres around the difficulty of relying on image representation when attempting to make the invisible visible. Colourful fabric banners fill the space of the gallery reflecting back on the video, prompting viewers to consider the quality of the air around them.

In a second video, Battle focuses on the responses gathered from the summer research and visualizes the tastes participants recorded when describing the air quality across four weeks in Edmonton. Handmade beeswax candles along with written postcard and instructional prompts are offered as takeaways for visitors, with the goal to provide the restorative and potentially purifying properties of beeswax, but also to assist participants in provoking the memories and tastes associated with various scents. These takeaways spur a linked sensory way of knowing and thinking about how we navigate our environments—most often triggering memories that may have simply been forgotten.



Interior + Poster image
Christina Battle, *the air we breathe* from the participatory series *Forecast*, 2022

the air we breathe builds upon Christina Battle’s expansive social practice that engages the natural world and the interdependent relationships that humans have with all things on earth. Through her studied approach, the circumstances of air inequality and environmental racism are critically examined, leaving little doubt that the actions of large industrial polluters have immediate and dire long-term consequences.⁸ Through creative and observational practices, the air we breathe asks how we may pay attention to the environmental changes in our communities and come to acknowledge the impacts on our global wellbeing. The systems of bad relations that govern the attitudes, policies and laws toward the natural world can only last so long. It is our imperative to collectively organize and counter the narratives that disconnect us from the environment, for our survival, now more than ever.

5 Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Duke University Press: Durham, North Carolina, 2021), 5.

6 Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2021), 25.

7 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Haymarket Press, Chicago, IL), 26-27.

8 The origins of the term “environmental racism” can be traced to Robert D. Bullard’s book *Dumping in Dixie* (1990), where he defines the term as one where environmental inequities faced by racialized communities—specifically Black communities in the US—are the result of both historical racism and class barriers. For how environmental racism shapes contemporary Canada, see: Raina Delisle, “‘I can feel your breath’: when COVID-19 and environmental racism collide,” *The Narwhal*, 19 March 2021, <https://thenarwhal.ca/covid-19-environmental-racism-canada/>.



How to see it

How to smell it

How to feel it