

Vapor is a survey of new art, architecture and design that takes our declining atmospheric conditions as the subject matter, medium and metaphor for creative work. The work in the show, undertaken by contemporary artists and architects around the San Francisco region and beyond, is evidence of a generation invested in activism and the implications of climate change. The show proposes new ways of testing, modeling, and finding solutions to the problems of air quality and greenhouse gas emissions.

We have reached a critical moment in which the evidence of climate change has become undeniable. Although there is a long tradition of environmental and activist art, there is an urgency to the work of artists and designers working today to respond to the current state of our environmental crisis.

Artists are now making use of technologies – sensors, databases, and communications equipment – that are only recently accessible outside a lab. This recent history has some kinship to the emergence of video art in the late 1960s and to its growth as accessibility to gear grew under the aegis of consumer electronics. In this sense, the title “Vapor” also refers to the growing ubiquity of means by which this work is being produced, as well as the expanse of greenhouse gases and other air conditions that serve as its focus. Other strategies raise consciousness and work creatively not just with technical tools, but by learning from and working within new economic structures and legislative policy.

The artists in Vapor consider these themes and are engaged in these strategies. They also share a sensibility for rendering what is invisible visible. Preemptive Media’s “AIR” project engages participants to examine their surrounding landscape through the lens of EPA carbon emission data and to add to the mapping of these pollutants with a portable monitoring device. Eric Paulos and his Urban Atmospheres collaborators have created a network of sensors that utilize the routes of municipal street sweepers to gather live air pollution data. They also seek to engage the public in “Citizen Science” by recruiting them to participate in a field study probing the urban environment. From New York, the architectural collaborative The Living brings “The Living City,” a project that not only visualizes an imminent future urbanism – where architecture has its own social network – but offers a prototype for the built results.

Amy Balkin’s “Public Smog” creates a public park through the economic mechanism of carbon trading. Futurefarmers’ “Civic Cycle” and “Civic Pump” are engaged with re-imagining urban transportation and creating a public dialogue around bike-share programs. Natalie Jeremijenko’s work focuses on both indoor and outdoor air pollution. Her “One Trees” project incorporates a bicycle tour of cloned trees that each reflect their environment in unique ways. The tour is taken with her “Clear Skies?” breathing masks, which critique public policy by ironically blackening in contact with pollutants. Jeremijenko also presents work from her xDesign Environmental Health Clinic, a lab that creates “prescriptions” for environmental health concerns, such as a lamp that uses photosynthesis to mitigate indoor air pollution.

Vapor is a provocation to us all to ask questions. In a region with a long history of environmental activism, how do these works contradict or confirm our identity, and our image of ourselves? What is the current state of environmentalism and activism? How do we view our contribution to climate change? What is the job of art and design in raising awareness and provoking action?

Vapor is expansive. The exhibition is augmented by a set of public programs, a website, a symposium, and more, to collectively form the greater Vapor Project. Expansiveness is our own strategy, not just to validate this work as essential to a culture of public discourse and engagement in the Bay Area; but also to spark further engagement with art, activism, and atmospheric issues, with the greater public.

-Alison Sant and Jordan Geiger