Kim Abeles' Environmental Art: Process, Poetics and Pedagogy

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When Kim Abeles moved to her studio in downtown Los Angeles just over 40 years ago, a thick blanket of white haze often resulted in "smog alerts." Perhaps that is why it took seven years for her to first glimpse a triangular wedge of the San Gabriel Mountains' ridgeline from her studio's fire escape. Abeles became curious how long it would take to see the mountain again, which led to her series *Pilgrimage to the Wedge* (1981-87). From February 26, 1985 to March 17, 1986 she shot 274 photographs until she had another clear vista of the mountain, more than one year later. Then on September 10, 1987 she walked directly from her studio to the closest point where she could see the mountain. Traveling on foot "as the crow flies" she traversed 16.5 miles in 10 hours during a first stage smog alert, taking photographs until the wedge finally emerged at the foothills in Altadena. These two durational experiments—one visual and indexical, the other embodied and performative—resulted in a large-scale installation with ancillary artifacts, documents and sculptures.[1]

Abeles' series demonstrates the salient characteristics of her process-oriented, conceptual, and interdisciplinary practice: she identifies a problem, devises a system to test a question or hypothesis, collects and documents evidence, then makes a series of art objects. She shares her acquired knowledge with viewers in work that is both aesthetic and poetic—it is

[1] The *Pilgrmmage to the Wedge* series included a large structure in the shape of a camera bellows with the 274 photographs inside, a drawing entitled *A New kind of Clock: Time based on the Frequency of Taking Photographs*, a map of her walk, *Pentipede,* a sculptural contraption that measured her stride; an altered gas mask, as well as *Instructions for Stride Forward* a documentation of the entire journey with color photographs, daily smog reports for Los Angeles.

never purely didactic, but pedagogical at its core, especially in the art she has produced to inform audiences about the increasingly dire state of our environment.

When producing the *Pilgrimage to the Wedge* series in 1987, Abeles noticed smog accumulating on her car; she then experimented with her unique process. She cut stenciled images on plates or fabric and left them on her rooftop for specific durations, allowing particulate matter to accumulate. She then cut away the stencils to reveal the image in smog. As Abeles has said: "To quote a stranger, they are 'footprints of the sky' … the *Smog Collectors* make visible the invisible air we breathe…[2] Abeles varies the exposure times, allowing the particulate matter to "etch" the images onto fabric, books, clocks, furniture, and other domestic objects. Some exist as singular works of art such as *Smog Catcher (Thirty Days of Smog)* (1992), while others are combined in larger, room-size installations such as *Forty Days and Forty Nights* (1991), including a dining table and chairs; plates with residual food; a bassinet and high chair that belonged to Abeles' daughter, and other images on the wall, all in smoggy silhouette. As Abeles has commented: "We live in the contradiction that the dangers are out there, beyond, and that we are safe in our homes. Since the worst in our air can't be seen, *Smog Collectors* are both literal and metaphorical depictions of the current conditions of our life source. They are reminders of our industrial decisions: the road we took that seemed so modern."

[2] Kim Abeles quoted in *Kim Abeles: Encyclopedia Persona: A Fifteen Year Survey*. (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art and Santa Monica Museum of Art, 1993), 86. This echoes artist Paul Klee's quote in which he states that "art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes the unseen visible" from his *Creative Confession* (1920).

Abeles' most well-known series, *Presidential Commemorative Smog Plate*s (1992), depicts thirteen from William McKinley to George Bush, their faces rendered in smog on white china, with quotes from each president hand-painted in gold around the rims. She left the plates out on the roof for different durations: a lighter dusting of particulate matter for presidents with more proactive policies and denser, darker accumulations for those with "violation or apathy toward the distressed environment."[3] For her recent exhibition at the Garage for Contemporary Art in Moscow (2019), Abeles returned to her *Smog Collectors*, producing portraits of ten world leaders who presented speeches at climate summits from 2011 to 2018. Making stencils from the official government portraits, she exposed them to smog and wrote quotes from the leaders' speeches in their native language, an intentional gesture to underscore their nationalism. By inscribing their words at this critical stage of awareness about the severity of climate change, she holds them accountable in the future: did their actions speak louder than their words?[4] This new series underscores the changes since the first Smog Collectors in the 1980s-1990s: in our globalized world with ever-more urgent environmental crises, the stakes are much higher and the time is much shorter. Abeles smog-etched plates with their ghost-like residue now become *memento mori–a* reminder of the ephemerality of life and the existential dilemma that awaits us if we do not take action now.

Since the 1990s, Abeles has produced work on other types of environmental pollution, often in workshops in schools, museums, or community-based organizations. Her sculpture *Dolphin Run-Off Suitcase* (1995), made from refuse she collected from the beach, was designed

[3] Abeles, *Encyclopedia Persona*, 86.
[4] This project was also presented at the 2019 Chicago Expo, sponsored by National Resources Defense Council.

specifically to educate children about the effects of throwing trash into storm drains. At the Harvard-Westlake School in Los Angeles in 2009 Abeles collected their five weekdays of trash, then cleaned, ironed and assembled it into a work of art, demonstrating to students the extent of their waste but also the potential for recycling in subsequent collaborative workshops. This preceded her even more ambitious project *Paper Person,* a 5' x 40' x 48' hanging sculpture made from trash generated by visitors to California Science Center on Earth Day 2009. In these examples, Abeles educates audiences—often students and non-artists— about critical environmental issues, then invites their active participation as co-producers in her work. Her dialogical and participatory process evokes educator/philosopher John Dewey's premise that the best type of learning occurs when we "learn by doing."

> *Though my work addresses a broad scope of environmental and social concerns, the soul of the art always engenders a discussion about the role of the individual in society*.[5]
>
> —Kim Abeles

Long before the term "social practice" entered the discourse of contemporary art, Kim Abeles' artistic production has informed audiences about critical socio-political issues from her early pivotal work on HIV/AIDs and freedom of speech, to her continuing engagement with the environmental issues discussed in this essay. Her powerful artistic practice—grounded in process, poetry and pedagogy— provides a palpable resistance by educating the public about both the practice of art and the critical issues of our time. Her ultimate message is a dual call to action: the creative potential of humanity and everyone's individual role in stewarding our planet.

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[5]Kim Abeles as quoted in an interview in *Ennyman's Territory*, accessed February 26, 2020 at: https://pioneerproductions.blogspot.com/2016/07/ten-minutes-with-la-artist-kim-abeles.html