**The Air We Breathe\_ Exhibition text\_September 2018**

Aberdeen’s dominant image as an oil and gas city that’s open for business has had very particular consequences for the ways in which people inhabit the city. Historically and presently it talks about itself in economic value, despite the social and political nature of living. Human life is about more than economics and survivability; it’s the relationships, communities and infrastructures that affect our daily lives.

Particular movements in the city’s recent history have opened gaps in this dominant image and currently there are multiple agents working on the image of Aberdeen’s future. It’s cultural image being one of them and a post – oil future and diversification of industry being another. As a city that’s questioning itself who’s vision of the future is validated and performed and, more importantly who’s isn’t is still in flux. These are certainly urgent times and consequentially the stories we tell as cultural workers are important. The city’s capacity for political disruption and agency is just one of these stories.

One such example of political disruption in the city, is the site of Union Terrace Gardens [UTG]. A design project to reinvent the heritage gardens was launched, noting the city centre site as underused and lacking disabled access. The winner’s announced in 2011 were design studio Diller Scofidio + Renfro with their proposal of a “Granite Web”[[1]](#footnote-1). The selection committee for this award consisted mainly of local business people, most notably the oil tycoon Ian Wood who backed the project financially.[[2]](#footnote-2) Aberdeen’s history in preserving heritage sites is not a positive one, with little of the city’s key heritage sites surviving. What does remain is often left unoccupied and deteriorating. The decision over UTG activated a local network of people in Aberdeen to campaign against the award, inviting specialists in to evaluate business cases and heritage conservation whilst offering their alternative vision.

They were disruptive, antagonistic and operated with multiple activist’s groups out with this specific subject – led approach. In 2012, it was announced that the city council had voted against the proposal bringing an end to what had been a highly divisive narrative. Responses caused when power structures, in this case unelected business leaders, are deciding the terms under which a place is shaped. Decisions are made in closed meeting rooms, with market-driven forms of public consultation. The UTG campaign is an example of what happens when people collectively gather to protest, mouth off, question and disrupt the decision making within our political system. As citizens, they give their time freely, they rely on haphazard approaches, on friendship and networks, not unlike independent curators.

This example is not typical, there are many more examples of collective action failing to bring about change globally and locally. In this city, the daily acts of protest operate as an undercurrent to the economic narratives, inhabiting the peripheries of the city.

The Air We Breathe is a project informed by one such political narrative. It is framed by the ongoing narrative of a proposed Energy from Waste (EFW) incinerator in East Tullos, Torry, South Aberdeen. Despite continued objections from the local community it has been voted through by the city council. This narrative raised urgent questions: What happens when power structures are telling us this is right for climate change targets? How do we imagine living here, or breathing here, if the incinerator is built? What are our capabilities for protest in contemporary, neoliberal societies? Who’s listening?

This is not the first time that the city has decided that Torry will be the dumping ground for its waste, this community has already successfully fought the proposal of an incinerator in 2003.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ongoing conversations and protest also surround the sewage treatment works, which has spewed acrid smells in the local area for decades. It’s location on the North – East coast creates a particular phenomenon in the form of temperature inversion, where hot air meets cold and creates a micro climate within Torry. This is known locally as ‘The Haar’ and traps gas and odours from the sewage treatment plant. As a consequence, residents close their windows and decide whether or not to place their washing on the line to dry. The River Dee separates the city centre and Aberdeen South however its form seems to disconnect these communities beyond a physicality.

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation [SIMD] is a government report which highlight the most and least deprived areas of the country, through assessments of income, employment, geographical access to services, crime and housing. In 2016 reports highlighted Aberdeen as a whole, as the second least deprived area in the country. In stark contrast the area of Torry East in Aberdeen was reported as the most deprived area of the North East, and within the 10% most deprived areas of Scotland.[[4]](#footnote-4) Global sociological and environmental studies have shown that minority and low – income communities often bear a disproportionate share of environmental costs, being unequally burdened from hazardous facilities and waste sites. It seems the decision to locate waste facilities in Torry, an area already facing health and social inequalities, is simply the status quo.

The representation of citizens through the role of city councillors can be often be at odds with each other. Building infrastructure through master plans, developing new spins for tourism, maintaining existing operations in the function and care of the city whilst balancing the books are just brief examples of their role. Articulating the role of care and maintenance of the city might be think of it as a house and the subsequent examples above as housekeeping. However, politics can do more than housekeeping, it can construct and protect the house itself. The question then becomes how might we question and disrupt this structure of power?

Philosopher Hannah Arendt’s often quoted phrase “men gather in speech” comes urgently to mind here. It defines the human necessity of dialogue and its role as the essential medium of the political. The speech act in Arendt’s context could be positioned as an active disruption, however, in the twenty first century the political effectiveness of human speech is troubled by the emergence of post – political thought and the dominance of technological advances.

Complicating this landscape further is that structures of power now also support spectacles of resistance and it remains important to attempt to differentiate between grass roots community groups, such as those objecting against the incinerator and forms of highly visible protest based on individual identities. Capitalist structures now commodify symbols of protest such as the LGBT rainbow by Barclay’s Bank and they might go further, appropriately entirely the iconography of protest, as seen in soft drink giant Pepsi’s 2017 advertising campaign. Forms of protest based on individual identities: gender, ethnicity, LGBT encourage gathering around symbols of difference, rather than symbols of commonality or commonly agreed action points. This political positioning, whilst highly visible arguably creates a spectacle of protest rather than a protest to effect political change. In contrast, grass roots community groups in their position of working towards a common concrete goal are likely to be silenced.

Given these conditions the importance of not only speech, but who’s listening becomes central to any attempt to disrupt and question systems of power. In this complicated set of relationships what might be tactics of disruption from a curatorial position?

Within The Air We Breathe the labouring body has operated quietly in the background; reading proposal and minutes from city council and community stakeholder meetings, contextual research on the role of incinerators nationally, the positioning of other campaign groups who are fighting the same fight, regular meetings, interviewing those involved in the campaign, letter writing to city councillors with minimal or no consequences and opening up the space of Gray’s School of Art as a space for the activist group to meet and organise. Opening up and changing the function of the art school raises a further question of how we might think about the role of cultural organisations in political narratives.

The public face of the project has been a series of events, operating within the curatorial role of commissioning but also supporting existing collaborations in the city.

Emerging artist Yvette Bathgate developed an audio work ‘The Thick and The Sticky’ in response to the environmental questions situated within the project such as; how do we feel more personally about the air we breathe? Working with available research on air pollution on our health, and in specific response to the proposed incinerator site she developed an audio work exploring a hypothetical narrative in which we might imagine a future act of breathing at this site. This work was showcased at a public event at the proposed incinerator site.

The project has also supported ongoing collaborations in the city in the form of a DIY air pollution monitor workshop and talk taking place in the council owned central library in Aberdeen. These systems were developed by citizens (a group situated in Torry, but also attached to the anti – incinerator campaign) and designers Ben Durack and Kevin Mulhern and had already produced a small batch of monitors within the city. This model of citizen science is situated in a global movement in response to increasing concerns over air pollution in cities. Through the creative commons license and open data platforms citizens are able turn the emotional drivers of such activism into a more concrete, data driven form. These concrete emotions have the potential to facilitate a better condition of living for people within their local communities.

The exhibition, in addition to the artists and designers already present in the project, has invited a new commission from Glasgow based artist Alison Scott. She has looked back into historic archives for examples of political eruptions, examples of radical literature and environmental concerns in the city. Her subsequent work ‘Burning Questions: A space for speaking, listening, letter writing and printing’ is a physical structure, that disrupts the existing architecture. It’s an invitation for you to perform these actions in the space of the exhibition.

At the time of writing this, the fight to stop the incinerator is still ongoing. A decision over which private bidder will be successful in getting the incinerator commission will be announced in the Autumn months, possibly during this show. The community continues to fight, however and the story continues outside of the space of curatorial deadlines.

The show does not seek to present a linear narrative of documented activities and instead it embraces the complexity of inhabiting political space. Actively working to reveal power structures, visible and invisible, presenting the voices of citizens and providing space for agency.

We invite you to use the exhibition to think about the quality of the air you breathe, to use your personal and professional body to disrupt spaces of power, however small, to question, to vocalise and begin a conversation in this space.

1. https://inhabitat.com/granite-web-diller-scofidio-renfro-win-competition-to-design-new-green-park-for-aberdeen-scotland/?variation=c [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ian Wood pledged around a third of the projects cost, at £50 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=9&ved=2ahUKEwi-rb2KkPrgAhVFrxoKHSG6BIcQFjAIegQIARAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnessenergy.co.uk%2Fnmsruntime%2Fsaveasdialog.aspx%3FlID%3D125%26sID%3D264&usg=AOvVaw2qlZhJqJyWiM\_PTspvT000 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.eveningexpress.co.uk/fp/news/local/figure-reveal-aberdeen-is-less-deprived-than-other-parts-of-scotland1/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)