

# Breathing Bricks

Nut Brother's *Dust Project* and the Politics of Particulate Matter

*Alex Knapp*



*Treasure deep within thee earth  
I'm resting now, ending this search  
I hold your form inside my hands  
Your flesh is dust, your bones are sand*

*I lay down inside abyss  
I cling to you, I've wanted this  
So, spill the dirt into the cleft I cannot breathe under its heft*

*Please don't be long Please don't be long Please don't be long...*

—*Damaged Bug, "The Cryptologist" (Dwyer 2017)*

Amidst the hustle and bustle of Beijing, a sustained hum folds into the city soundscape. The wheels of a 1000-watt industrial-sized bright-white vacuum cleaner scrape against the sidewalk and road. The person tugging along the vacuum wears low-profile clothing: a navy-colored shirt; deep maroon slacks; sometimes a woven straw sun hat, other times a face mask. Despite his innocuous appearance, the stone-faced man draws attention. With the nose of the vacuum held out in front of him like a torch guiding his way, the man moves throughout Beijing's urban landscapes. From

### Student Essay Contest Winner

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Tiananmen Square to the National Stadium and from small boroughs to busy roads, he walks for four hours each day collecting particular particles. In the thickets of smog blanketing the city of Beijing, the man's vacuum sucks up the micro-matter from construction sites, exhaust pipes, and heaps of decomposing garbage. Like a lung, the vacuum's filter traps blackish-gray dust that cakes over time like blood clots. City noises begin to dominate the rumble and tumble of the vacuum cleaner. The man and his machine fade into the smog like the scratchy outline of danger in a nightmare. You turn, and cough.

In 2015, Beijing-based performance artist Nut Brother completed *Dust Project*.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of 100 days, Nut Brother dragged a vacuum cleaner through the streets of Beijing. He then formed the collected smog particles into a solid dust brick. *Dust Project* brings into sharp relief the harm caused by breathing polluted air and the worsening effects of anthropogenic climate change. *Dust Project* interrogates the politics of particulate matter and the violence endured as a result of involuntary actions, such as breathing in the polluted city. Nut Brother's *Dust Project* emphasizes the materiality of breath; of dust's particulate matter enmeshing with the body's matter; of contact with deadly particles that are "invisible" yet are inescapably material. Nut Brother's implicated body is a reminder of our material entanglement with broader ecologies and the human-made dangers that continue to take lives.

Nut Brother's *Dust Project* positions the body in performance as a *filter* rather than a canvas. The body in performance is a site of knowledge production that expresses our interstitial entanglement with matter, toxic or otherwise. Nut Brother emphasizes local influences on people's lives to mark a politics rooted in a dynamic reciprocity with others and the environment, or what Dwayne Trevor Donald calls a commitment to "ethical relationality," an "ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other" (2009:6). Nut Brother

Figure 1. (previous page) Nut Brother and his vacuum. Nut Brother, *Dust Project*, 2015, Beijing. From "China's Activist Artist" (*Al Jazeera English* 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

1. Nut Brother details how he came up with his name: "Nut, in English, it means someone who's weird and hard to deal with [...] I think it represents my attitude perfectly" (in Yu 2020).



Figure 2. Nut Brother standing by the Tiananmen Gate. Nut Brother, Dust Project, 2015, Beijing. From “China’s Activist Artist” (*Al Jazeera English* 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

raises environmental awareness vis-à-vis his attention to the body as interdependent with noxious atmospheres.

The endured labor of producing *Dust Project* and the harm Nut Brother incurred to complete the performance complicates the relation between endurance and performance art. In her study of endurance art, Lara Shalson argues that the category of “endurance” necessitates purposeful action(s) of a planned event with an end that cannot be known. Pushing against the categorical confines of “endurance,” Shalson shows how endurance art need not be an exercise in pain. Instead, performing endurance tunes our attention towards the actions and reactions of the performer that prompt an “investigation of what it means to last” (2018:35). The performance of endurance in *Dust Project* gestures towards the labor involved in walking around Beijing, breathing in pollution, and pulling a weighty vacuum cleaner for more than 14 weeks; the atmosphere itself becomes something to endure. Nut Brother’s performance of endurance brings into focus the contradiction of breathing to live while breathing particulate sediments that hasten death. If to last means to endure, the artist’s body and the people’s bodies now emerge as filters that, through the necessity of breath, must catch the microscopic detritus of the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking alongside Rob Nixon’s notion of “slow violence,” which offers a framework for understanding the attritional and quotidian horrors of ecological degradation, *Dust Project* signals a slow violence endured through both breathing and the labor of performing, which together impact the artist’s lungs as they accumulate particulate pollution as much as does the vacuum cleaner humming behind them (Nixon 2011:14). *Dust Project*’s political gravitas, then, lies in the labor process of enduring the harm inflicted on the artist’s body as well as his invisibilized labor of creating the dust brick. The dust brick operates in relation to commodity fetishism, tapping

2. My use of “Anthropocene” does not denote a flat signifier of the “human” that erases difference. In recent years, political ecologists and other theorists have offered terms to problematize the Anthropocene (as *Anthropos* invokes a phantasmic “human”) with claims of the “Capitalocene,” “Plantationocene,” and “Cthulhucene” by the scholars J.W. Moore (2015), Anna Tsing (in Mitman 2019), and Donna Haraway (2015, 2016), respectively. These conceptualizations show how the problem of the present ecological conditions is historically and socially contingent and, as a result, the people, corporations, and institutions within them are as well.

into the problematic art world logic that fetishized Nut Brother's brick as a valuable thing *in and of itself* while ignoring his labor (see Marx [1867] 1990:164–65). The making of the dust brick stood as a powerful symbol that was discussed most frequently by media outlets. It is, however, but a coda to *Dust Project*. Nut Brother's laborious performance, inhalation of toxic matter, dust collection, and brick production all expose material impacts on the body and environment that reconfigure life outcomes and ecological systems with relation to decay.

Dust, defined as small particles of solid matter, floats in a material-symbolic relation with the body. Nonetheless, dust of all types comes about under specific conditions, especially fine particulate matter with a diameter less than 2.5 micrometers (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) from various human-made and environmental sources, which is particularly deadly. According to a harrowing study released in *Environmental Research*, PM<sub>2.5</sub> pollution from fossil fuel combustion led to 8.7 million premature deaths globally in 2018 (see Vohra et al. 2021). The role of dust in *Dust Project* blurs the boundary between where the politics of particulate matter begin and end as it becomes more challenging to find communities not affected by this microscopic pollution. Is breathing in little tumble-weeds of dust from room corners or side streets *always* political, or does dust become politically charged in preventable circumstances that are largely human-made? The slippages between natural and anthropogenic dust demonstrate that for Beijing's residents, and all other communities experiencing particulate matter pollution, a cough is no longer just a cough. A wheeze, face mask, air-filtration system, or decreased life expectancy imbricates residents within a political relationship to the atmosphere. *Dust Project* centers air as its *mise-en-scène* to both heighten an environmental consciousness and historicize the materiality of Beijing's atmosphere.

The story of Nut Brother's *Dust Project* unfolds in three parts: the 100 days of walking to collect dust; his visitation by the Guoanbu (国安部), China's "secret police"; and the creation of the dust brick.

## Walking and Working the Polluted City

### *Nut Brother's Negotiation of the Toxic Everyday*

Breath can equal death in Beijing. A 2015 study found that between 1.2 to 2 million people die each year in China from particulate matter pollution.<sup>3</sup> Locals have named the persistent tickle in the throat that comes from breathing in smog the "Beijing cough" (see Peplow 2014). So, too, a study from 2020 showed that 81% of citizens across the whole of China live where the air quality does not meet healthy levels and an estimated 1.24 million people died from air pollution in 2017 (see Yin et al. 2020). That being said, a change from coal to natural gas as well as other measures have contributed to a significant drop in Beijing's particulate matter pollution in more recent years (see Shi et al. 2021). From 2013, Beijing officials note a 63% reduction in PM<sub>2.5</sub> pollution to 33 micrograms, yet this is still double the World Health Organization's recommendation to keep PM<sub>2.5</sub> density below 15 micrograms (see UN Environment 2019). Beijing's air thus indexes the historical-material conditions of China's rapid industrialization from a largely agricultural society, the standardization of particle traps on modern vehicle exhausts, wood or coal burning for cooking, and weather conditions that all affect particulate matter pollution. The common political denominator in terms of the atmosphere is fossil fuel combustion and an extensive use of petrochemicals as the lifeblood of the global political economy. In a substantial blow to environmentalist efforts, for instance, the Chinese government produced 4.07 billion tons of coal in 2021 (a 4.7% increase from 2020) to diminish the need for imports as well as support the country's industrial efforts nationally. The United States military also emits more CO<sub>2</sub> than many nations and remains one of the world's leading polluters, leaving China and the United States as countries with the highest CO<sub>2</sub> emissions globally (see Crawford 2019; Hussain 2019). Enduring toxic particulate matter and polluted air as a lived reality is not just China's problem.<sup>4</sup>

3. For real-time tracking of Beijing's air quality, visit <https://aqicn.org/city/beijing/> (see Rohde and Muller 2015).

4. I note this as racist neoconservative and neoliberal rhetoric continues to configure pollution narratives as a problem of uncontainable overpopulation in non-Western countries, like India and China.



Figure 3. Nut Brother is photographed by a bystander. *Nut Brother*, Dust Project, 2015, Beijing. From “China’s Activist Artist” (*Al Jazeera English* 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

To address these particulate and particular conditions, Nut Brother logged on to his Sina Weibo account, a popular Chinese social media platform, and posted the location and weather conditions of the route he planned to take each day.<sup>5</sup> Nut Brother dressed, lugged out the roughly 50-pound vacuum, got to his starting point, and began to walk. Citizens gawked, street cleaners laughed, and the surrounding smog ebbed and flowed. Over the 100 days that Nut Brother performed *Dust Project*, his activities brought a stark contrast to the urban landscape. Passing by national landmarks and narrow streets, Nut Brother followed the familiar smog-filled routes of some 20 million Chinese citizens for the arbitrary duration of 100 days, taking the same toxic breaths as the rest of Beijing’s residents. Nut Brother himself raises this contention (through a translator):

Is 100 days long enough to collect sufficient dust for a brick? A person asked me that same question. But that is not the most important. What matters to me is what I did there in those 100 days, walking here and there—collecting dust just like an air cleaner is symbolic. (Creative Time 2016)

Moving as an “air cleaner,” Nut Brother calls attention to the laboring body: if air cleaners were real and necessary jobs, how would they move around the city? What does it mean to endure the atmosphere, to take breaths that then *take* life even as they provide the preconditions for it? The temporal dimension of dust is evident in its build-up in our bodies as well as the metaphorization of our return to earth, which Nut Brother also references: “Our city has become jammed with cars and plagued by chemicals. The more we seek, the more we search for resources, and the more dust we make. When we have exhausted all the resources on Earth, we will also become dust” (in *Vision Times* Staff 2015).

Walking is a declaration of what is close and distant and the possibilities one creates weaving through cities haunted by unlivable environmental futures. Nut Brother’s walking seems to posit: where is that “there” he is trudging towards with vacuum in tow when no destination can be seen “here” amidst the smog?

5. The logs and all of Nut Brother’s Sina Weibo account, where I got much of my information on his life and past work, have been shut down. I was unable to interview Nut Brother directly for this article as I could not find any direct contact information for him. I have compensated for this by using his own words from interviews as much as possible.

Nut Brother's walking portrays a lack of a livable atmosphere and a tenable future. With a whiff of gasoline, a sputtering exhaust pipe, and a hazy day of smog, *Dust Project* renders the simple act of walking in relation to toxicity, or, as Mel Chen puts it, a reciprocity with the toxins "that can directly implicate the vulnerability of the living body" (2012:202). Nut Brother regards the material and symbolic weight of these oppressive conditions: "What I've done is like Sisyphus rolling his giant stone [...] There's no use, but it can make more people think about this issue. It's a spiritual thing" (in Buckley and Wu 2015).

Nut Brother walked the city in the role of an "air cleaner" to elucidate the absurdity of Beijing's extreme air pollution while also mocking the status quo of governmental and corporate logic that makes people labor as individuals to undo the problems governments and corporations have created and have the power to ameliorate on a mass scale. Will there be underpaid gig workers laboring to clean the air? Nut Brother came upon a street cleaner who murmured, "we now have air cleaners, what an amazing city" as Nut Brother passed by (in Creative Time 2016). A food delivery worker asked him how good the pay was for an air cleaner and another passerby inquired about how much he could pay Nut Brother to clean his apartment. If there's going to be smog at least someone might pay their bills off it besides doctors and manufacturers of masks and air-filtration systems.

In *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal*, Steven Connor argues:

that the air has become the element, not of our exposure or containment, but of our immixture with, our inextricability from the outside world. The air has become mediation itself. We find our own image in this mediate matter (mediated and mediating), not just because we communicate through our (largely airborne) media, but because we are the throughput of those mediations. (2010:31)

Air, in other words, has become indicative of human mediation and media. Spouts of steam engines, industrial smokestacks, carbonated bubbles, and ozone layers are all evidence of human mediation that has visibilized air. Air is marked by human action and as such reflects those actions.

The nonhuman vacuum performs an "intermedial" role (Mukherjee 2020:31), providing a material metaphor of breathing in particulate matter pollution *as well as* establishing the very basis for Nut Brother's provocation: What if Beijing's smog was so bad that there were air cleaners? These complex dynamics reify air in terms of its "dimensionality" rather than its ontological thingness (Connor 2010:35). Air is a labored in and live atmosphere.

*Dust Project's* circumnavigation of this polluted atmosphere, then, creates what Victoria Nguyen calls "respiratory publics": "disparate actors that initiate a process of collective attunement to the atmosphere through uncoordinated daily observations, precautions, and practices of pollution management" (2020:444). Nguyen explains how Beijing's residents manage living in the smog:

Rather than taking on air pollution as a whole, respiratory publics are concerned with the particular contexts and practical effects of Beijing's smog—as it transforms local neighborhoods, daily habits, and social spaces. They illuminate the qualitative and lived aspects of pollution, emphasizing the importance of day-to-day practices, objects, and relations that render toxicity legible. (456)

Vacuum, breath, and brick make the lived experience of particulate matter pollution discernible; they show that dust's harm to the body is processual, dynamic, and deleterious. In the respiratory publics of Beijing, breath becomes something endured, even if unequally metered with regard to factors like class divisions that determine who can afford air-filtration systems or "cleaner" ways of living that essentially buy more life.

Different markers of care also begin to shape these respiratory publics. The face mask emerges as a signifier of care for the future as well as a material reality in/on the face(s) of smog inhalation. So, too, the face mask "troubles a neat dichotomy between agency and passivity, reaffirming our vital entanglements and the precarious boundaries between people and their environments" (Nguyen 2020:452). The face mask, like the vacuum, is a tangle *mediator*

for those trying to breathe in a smoggy atmosphere and signals a communal investment in navigating the slow violence of a toxic everyday, or, as of 2020, a global pandemic. Nut Brother himself has wrangled with the tension between the agency and passivity of moving among Beijing's respiratory publics since moving from his hometown of Shenzhen: "When I first arrived in Beijing, I wore a hygienic mask for a few days, but later I stopped. In smog like this, there's no escaping" (in Buckley and Wu 2015). While the face mask allows people to protect themselves from the full inhalation of particulate matter, there are limits to the preventative measures in such massive levels of pollution.

*Dust Project* unveiled how everyday people navigate the lived reality of smog pollution. *Dust Project* never produced any formal spectators per se, yet the implication for pedestrians walking alongside Nut Brother was clear: in the slow violence of Beijing's atmosphere, to invoke Frazer Ward's statement regarding performance art, "There are no innocent bystanders" (2012:21). While performance art has a productive lineage of problematizing the role of the spectator, there were no innocent or passive bystanders for *Dust Project*; all "participated" in the polluted atmosphere of Beijing that continues to kill people whether or not they choose to act or remain passive. Beijing's respiratory publics come together as they all participate in negotiating particulate matter pollution, even as those efforts are undermined by an unsustainable system of development, consumption, and profiteering that make these efforts moot—a clear expression of the contradictions of their interdependence. *Dust Project* alerts spectators to the lived reality of Beijing's smog but shows that a constant entanglement with dust disturbs the very notion of "agency." As the requirement to breathe involuntarily implicates people in performing endurance, the only "willful" passivity that remains is an exercise in lasting.

*Dust Project*, therefore, portrays an enmeshment of dust, breath, and body that complicates the role of agency and passivity, as well as subject and object, in performance. Such a conceit aligns with Stacy Alaimo's theorization of "trans-corporeality," a term to describe how our bodies are inseparable from the environment (2008:238). To conceive of breathing in dust as a "literal contact zone" signals a continual entanglement with matter (Alaimo 2010:2). Nut Brother makes clear a "contact zone" between Beijing's smog and his own body as if to show that every breath we take is, quite literally, mingling with something or someone else.

For instance, a fair amount of indoor dust is comprised of dead skin cells and deadly chemicals (see Pelley 2017; Lerner 2021). As environmental journalist Sharon Lerner has shown, the ideal of human agency, and even solidarity itself, is turned upside down by our toxic relation with particulate matter pollution. Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS)—substances also known as "forever" chemicals due to their long half-life and widespread abundance in substances like Teflon—are traced in the blood of virtually all Americans and across the globe, including China (Lerner 2016). The particulate matter Nut Brother vacuumed that so detrimentally affects the lungs also does damage to the heart: microscopic matter seeps from lung linings into bloodstreams. Health outcomes from this constant inhalation include heart disease, chronic lung disease, and death (Rivers 2015).

The 100 grams of dust particles Nut Brother used to make the brick, and his body's involvement in that process, trouble standard significations and ways of relating to the world. Nut Brother's body is subjected to particulate matter vis-à-vis unavoidable engagement with that matter. *Dust Project* thus invokes Karen Barad's idea of "intra-action," a term she uses to replace "interaction" and the subject-object binary that term implies. Breathing does not imply an interaction; instead, breath denotes an "intra-action" where matter exists in a state of potentiality with other matter; nothing exists before materializing in intra-actions that make all matter and meaning co-constitutive. This challenges the idea that the human body exists before encounters with anything (Barad 2007:33). Barad's critique of individualist metaphysics upends the belief that cause and effect works unidirectionally: people pollute the air, and the air acts back. The intra-actions of capitalist development and fossil fuel use politicize matter and breath as exchanges that reconstitute what it means to breathe amidst polluted atmospheres. Agency, as the ability to act, emerges *through* these intra-actions, instead of as a capacity always already bestowed to the ideal liberal humanist subject. People are not doomed to breathe in smog nor are they unable to escape the capitalist realism and nation-state ideologies that make such conditions possible. The inescapable enmeshments of smog and lung materializes and makes political

particulate matter pollution, and so the capacity to change one's respiratory publics involves reconstituting the intra-actions that occur within them, as Nut Brother exhibits in his performance art.

Breathing particulate matter is thus an involuntary and intra-active process that displays how breath makes us interdependent with the planet to undercut the fiction that humans are separate from the environment. *Dust Project* politicizes breathing by demonstrating that it is impossible to do so without physically and symbolically changing something or someone else at all times. The slow violence of smog inhalation is a series of intra-actions with particulate matter that leaves a toxic imprint and alters life outcomes. To change these conditions, then, we must attend to the matter of matter and its political dimensions. Stopping the production of deadly particulate matter pollution that profits from extractive industries might be a start and requires *collective* action. Nut Brother's oeuvre, as well as his dealings with the Chinese government, express such a collectivity to make clear the possibilities for human agency that emerge from the intra-actions of the toxic everyday.

## A Time for Tea

### *Nut Brother's Environmentalism Amidst Exercises of the State*

The relationship between the law and artistic expression in China has a robust and complicated history, stemming from the assumption that art can critique the government despite the government's policy of suppressing dissent.<sup>6</sup> The question remains: how far can artists go in confronting the government? Many observers in the Global North were unaware of this tension until the 2011 arrest of prominent contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

China's present relation with artistic expression cannot simply be explained by a Cold War 2.0 rhetoric that presumes artists who "resist" the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are mere tools for the propagation of Western interests.<sup>7</sup> Nut Brother's relationship with the CCP is no less complex than that of others who do explicitly political work in China. Nut Brother knew that if Chinese authorities perceived his performances as too critical of the CCP's governance, he could face censorship or even arrest to halt his artistic expression. In the last couple days of *Dust Project*, Nut Brother received a letter from the Ministry of State Security or Guoanbu, China's "secret police." They did not arrest him, however. The Guoanbu wanted to have tea. "Tea-drinking" (*he cha* 喝茶) is a colloquialism for a summons by the Guoanbu (Cao 2012). The meeting may or may not include actual tea-drinking, but it often involves two to three members of the Guoanbu and can last for many hours. At the Creative Time Summit DC in 2016, Nut Brother recalled this tea-drinking incident.<sup>8</sup> The Guoanbu's foremost concern pertained to why Nut Brother was roaming around Beijing and collecting dust. What were his motives? Who was he friends with? What was the nature of his art? Was he working for anyone? Nut Brother assured them that *Dust Project* was a performance piece of his own creation. At this point, *Dust Project* had become quite popular on Sina Weibo, with many tracking the daily updates and multiple foreign outlets now picking up the story. The Guoanbu reminded him not to be manipulated by foreign media as he began to do interviews and sent Nut Brother on his way (Creative Time 2016).

Even before *Dust Project*, Nut Brother's art commented upon the stakes of environmentalism and the Chinese government's role in ecological governance. While attending Hubei University in Wuhan, he began writing poetry, which won him multiple awards. In 2007, he went back to the city of Shenzhen to pursue editorships but nothing panned out. This led Nut Brother to begin making performance art in 2008. After moving to Beijing that same year, one of Nut Brother's first performances staged an intervention at the Yulin Lychee and Dog Meat Festival (founded in 2009) where gatherers eat thousands of dogs in late June to commemorate the summer solstice. Taking

6. On the relation between Chinese law and art, see Pitman B. Potter (2017).

7. On contemporary China and the politics of governance within the global art scene see Christopher Beam (2015).

8. The Creative Time Summit is an annual conference that brings together artists, activists, and scholars to examine many issues, namely the intersection of art and politics.





Figure 4. Nut Brother standing in front of contaminated bottled water. Nut Brother, Nongfu Spring Market, 2018, Beijing. From “China’s Activist Artist” (Al Jazeera English 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

a dead dog killed at the festival, he cremated its corpse and placed the ashes in 100 blue balloons. The balloons were released into the atmosphere where they would eventually pop, thus spreading the ashes and signifying the dog’s ascension into heaven.

After *Dust Project*, Nut Brother continued to have encounters with the Guoanbu. His 2018 performance piece *Nongfu Spring Market*, for example, put another target on his back. To spotlight China’s water issues, Nut Brother filled 9,000 plastic bottles of the popular brand Nongfu Spring with unclean water from Xiaohaotu village in the Shaanxi Province of Northwestern China and displayed them at the 798 Art Zone in Beijing’s Art District. When Nongfu Spring complained and the police took down the exhibition, Nut Brother moved the bottles to a repurposed military van (known as the Moving Art Museum) and drove the exhibit around the Art District. The water in these bottles contained high levels of iron and manganese from gas and coal-mining operations. Despite Nongfu Spring’s aggression towards Nut Brother and their successful efforts to shut down the project, the performance caught the authorities’ attention and the government opened an investigation into the region’s water quality. In China as in other countries the government continues to pay lip-service to environmental concerns while maintaining a commitment to development and progress, a surefire holdover from modernist and capitalist logics of globalization and competition between states.

Nut Brother has also created work addressing the tensions and biases surrounding sexuality and queerness in China, as homosexuality was illegal until 1997. In response to some health clinics offering “conversion” therapy, in 2019 Nut Brother and other activists set up a clinic of their own in Shenzhen that offered to make cisgender people queer and used social and other media to expose companies that still offer conversion therapy (see Zhang 2019). Nut Brother registered the company, hired a licensed therapist, and set up the clinic in a rented apartment. Nut Brother’s 2020 piece, titled as both *Shut Up for 30 Days* and *Error 404*, highlighted the Chinese government’s lack of transparency regarding Covid-19. Taking a vow of silence in July 2020 to contest the CCP’s censorship of matters related to Covid-19, Nut Brother deployed various objects to cover his mouth and tracked his performance via a photo log on Instagram. In April of 2021, Nut Brother traveled to the small town of Zibo in Shandong Province where locals claim that the Yueyang River has been polluted by mining and chemical industries. Nut Brother and other volunteers brought peppers and stuffed toy fish and placed them in the mustard-colored river to make it look like a



Figure 5. Nut Brother paints an “X” over his mouth to protest government censorship of Covid-19. Nut Brother, *Shut Up for 30 Days*, 2020, Beijing. From “China’s Activist Artist” (*Al Jazeera English* 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

for 30 Days, and the Yueyang River piece brought Nut Brother trouble with local authorities. He recalls these encounters with the Guoanbu: “The first thing they told me was ‘artists are garbage.’ I was pretty shocked” (in Yu 2020). One resulted in arrest. In 2019, Nut Brother was detained in relation to a project he was starting on the topic of financial fraud. Nut Brother was imprisoned for 10 days:

In such a restricted environment, like China, art is an entry point that might be accepted by all sections of the society, and can be seen as a special political practice. So, in light of that, “Dust Plan” can be seen as a consequence of the society and also a symbol of resistance. (in Creative Time 2016)

Nut Brother has grappled with the CCP’s governance of his artistic expression as he has continued to attempt to undermine the state’s power structures by exposing governmental contradictions. All of the *Dust Project* documentation was wiped by the government from Nut Brother’s Sina Weibo account and is presently unrecoverable. His experiences with censorship and the Guoanbu, as well as his 2019 arrest, are proof of his work’s impact. His art not only comments upon Beijing’s smog-filled streets as a material and lived reality, but also on the need to cut through state bureaucracy and censorship by making his appeals very public for other Chinese citizens and the world at large.

Nut Brother’s navigation of Chinese governance and his own environmentalism leads me to ask: How do we create a sense of global communitarian praxis in relation to climate change that allows us to talk to each other without defaulting to the Global North’s “public sphere” *episteme* that often excludes more people than it includes? Ursula Heise’s notion of “eco-cosmopolitanism” attempts to answer this question (2008:10). Heise complicates claims that the local makes us think globally when, in actuality, our sense of the impact on the whole planet makes us more effective local actors. Such an approach does not negate differences among actors but rather insists that our connectedness to global life must guide how we enact change in our specific locales. The problem is that abstract risk discourse—that is, the ways we discuss threats like smog or Covid-19—favors a universalizing narrative that the whole planet is tainted, which undermines the focus needed on specific local problems related to these global issues. Nut Brother’s *Dust Project* achieves such an eco-cosmopolitanism in two ways: (1) air becomes the *mise-en-scène*—the setting—as a historical-material atmosphere rather than an abstract universal; and (2) the piece *particularizes* a sense of planet in, quite literally, the local (particulate) matters of Beijing.

We must move past narratives of universalized risk, unless they are concerned with understanding how others may be approaching the problem in their own lives and on their own terms, as in Nut Brother’s oeuvre. Even though only small changes were made at the local infrastructural level, Nut Brother’s *Nongfu Spring Market* highlighted China’s national water problems and sparked an investigation. Nut Brother deployed his intra-national platform in an effort to broadcast to the world that China’s problems are experienced worldwide. He caused the government to initiate

hotpot, a popular cooking style and serving method in Chinese cuisine. Much like *Nongfu Spring Market* and *Dust Project*, this performance utilized social media’s viral culture to pressure local governments. As Phoebe Zhang reports, Nut Brother got messages from local authorities to erase his social media posts, and “One even offered him 10,000 yuan (US \$1,523). They would not clarify whether they were with the local government” (Zhang 2021). *Dust Project*, *Nongfu Spring Market*, *Shut Up*

positive environmental governance, even if their actions were done to stave off embarrassment. Heise's eco-cosmopolitanism thus requires communitarian praxis in contexts of global connectivity and environmental internationalism. As local air quality index warnings light up my phone in Chicago, global concerns reify lived particulate matters. *Dust Project* formulates the everydayness of breathing as a site-specific effector and planetary connector. Breath is local and global.

## Treasure Deep within Thee Earth

### *How to Fetishize a Brick of Dust*

After 100 days, Nut Brother opened the vacuum to find a thick layer of black dust weighing approximately 100 grams. In 2015, that amount of dust was equivalent to what 62 Beijing residents would breathe each day.<sup>9</sup> After storing the 2.5 micrometer dust particles, Nut Brother took his haul to a local masonry where it was mixed with clay to form a roughly 9" x 4.5" brick. This mixture caused the amount of dust to appear exaggerated. As a result, the brick-making

garnered some criticism from commenters. Nut Brother's attempt to scale-up the message of the dust brick via a material mixing is important: the result offers a better understanding of the dust brick's rhetorical weight; it shows how the brick acts as palpable symbol for *Dust Project* but also provoked international media attention. Materially and discursively it analogizes the intra-actions of smog and breath. As Barad shows us, "Material-discursive practices are specific iterative enactments — agential intra-actions — through which matter is differentially engaged and articulated (in the emergence of boundaries and meanings), reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities in the iterative dynamics of intra-activity that is agency" (2003:822–23). Meaning and matter, in other words, are inextricable as every metaphor is defined by material intra-actions and every intra-action produces attendant meanings. In the intra-action of dust and clay, Nut Brother produces a commentary on the inexorable entanglements of particulate matter. The dust brick operates as a synecdoche for atmospheric pollution in the form of something that literally builds the very civilizations and institutions producing adverse climate effects.

That the dust brick should be taken up online so readily also tells us something about the efficacy of environmental imagery, as well as its limits, within the domain of global and virtual discourse. On Nut Brother's Sina Weibo account and across broader social media platforms, commenters often participated in a tongue-in-cheek, yet biting, recognition of *Dust Project's* site-specific ramifications. Comments like "Nearly everyone in Beijing would have a brick in their stomachs. Older people, maybe five"; "If all of the dust in Beijing was collected together, it would be enough to build the world's biggest environmental protection bureau"; and "Does that mean my lung is filled with bricks?" all point towards a coming-to-terms with the attritional



Figure 6. Making the dust brick. Nut Brother, Dust Project, 2015, Beijing. "China's Activist Artist" (*Al Jazeera English* 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

9. The vacuum he used had a flow rate of 234 cubic meters per hour with a filter accuracy of 0.2 microns (Vision Times Staff 2015).



Figure 7. The finalization of the dust brick. Nut Brother, Dust Project, 2015, Beijing. "China's Activist Artist" (Al Jazeera English 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

effects of smog pollution vis-à-vis the materiality and metaphor of the dust brick (Buckley and Wu 2015; Sumitra 2015). More commentators show that the dust brick trafficked as an enigma rather than a mere ending to *Dust Project*. After seeing media reports, representatives of a music festival called Nut Brother to ask if they could use the brick as the main award statue. He declined: "In fact, I would never sell this brick and I would never use it for [an] other purpose" (Creative Time

2016). Another commentator said that the brick should be thrown at the Ecology and Environment minister's head. Some derided *Dust Project* and its brick as sheer artistic embellishment, while others were quick to ordain Nut Brother as a social activist and true artist. Nut Brother shared at the Creative Time Summit that the dust brick meant something different to each person:

This brick represents something ridiculous to many people. It suddenly becomes famous after [a] series of media reports. Many netizens even called it high art [and offered] 100 yen to buy this. I told them I would sell it at the price of 100 million. Of course, that was a joke. (Creative Time 2016)



Figure 8. The dust brick in its final resting place. Nut Brother, Dust Project, 2015, Beijing. "China's Activist Artist" (Al Jazeera English 2020; screenshot courtesy of Alex Knapp)

The dust brick became for many a "commodity fetish." For Marx, the commodity fetish in capitalist society indicates how seemingly mundane things, like bricks, come to be imbued with value as things rather than valued for the labor that goes into producing them (Marx [1867] 1990:164–65). The reactions to Nut Brother's dust brick express a two-fold dynamic: (1) Media fixation on *Dust Project's* brick shows how the logic of the commodity fetish elided Nut Brother's labor; and (2) the materiality and metaphor of the brick subverts the logic of the commodity fetish as it made

people think about their bodies laboring in smog. The dust brick was granted artistic and economic value as a fetishized representative symbol *in and of itself*. Yet, the brick also stoked an anxiety, albeit often comedic, upon the recognition of smog inhalation's materiality ("does that mean my lung is filled with bricks?" [Sumitra 2015]).

The digital sphere benefits artists like Nut Brother as viral posts and regional and global pressure help make their artworks accessible to greater numbers and potentially politically effective. Nonetheless, as Nut Brother's commentary exposes, the fixation on artistic representationalism that brackets art in relation to commodity logics continues to be a problem. By siloing the dust

brick as a mere symbol or something with a price tag, Nut Brother's labor is invisibilized and the politics of particulate matter are altogether ignored.

After *Dust Project's* completion, Nut Brother took his brick to the popular Xicheng District in the heart of downtown Beijing, known for its hip stylings, chic nightlife, and outstanding food. There, Nut Brother met some masons who were building a courtyard. As they worked, Nut Brother handed one of the laborers his dust brick, and he "laid the brick into the wall without bothering [to raise] his head" (Creative Time 2016). By returning the brick to the hands of the worker, who treated it like any other old brick, Nut Brother further undermined the commodity fetishism of those who viewed it as an artwork in and of itself and those who sought to purchase the brick as a piece of valuable art. Instead, Nut Brother's brick joined the thousands of anonymous bricks that make up the city. A small brick of dust rests in support of the city that created it.

## Enduring the Atmosphere

### *Air as Dust Project's Mise-en-scène*

Air is political. *What* we breathe, *where* we breathe, and the ways in which various conditions effect *how* we breathe stem, in part, from the sociopolitical organization of human life. As the eruption of volcanic ash or natural gas-filled mine shafts are not part of most everyday human experience, the causes of air quality decline that impact most people are anthropogenic: CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, asbestos, chemical factory waste drifts, and Monsanto™ agri-pesticide grifts. Nut Brother cares very much about the politics of air: "The things I'm concerned about are all related to people's survival experience [...] For example, do people have fresh air, clean water to drink? These are basic human rights" (in Ryan and Mou 2018). His emphasis on "survival experience"—what citizens endure just to physically survive—is what connects all of Nut Brother's projects: the longevity of the body, its co-constitutive relation with the environment, and its implication in the environment vis-à-vis the sheer materiality of living (breathing, drinking, eating, and so on). Taking air as *Dust Project's* mise-en-scène pushes against viewing the atmosphere as fixed or as a backdrop that frames the action of the performance. Rather, the dust floating within the atmosphere *acts*.

Air also remains political along the fault lines of class, race, gender, ability, and geography. After all, *who* is doing the breathing? As Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze emphasize, "If 'breathing spaces' in the US today are racialized geographies, we believe they are also key sites through which to explore alternate, more just worlds," stating that "the inability to breathe can be understood as both a metaphor and material reality of racism, which constrains not just life choices and opportunities, but the environmental conditions of life itself" (2016:15). In the US-American context, as was seen over the summer of 2020 after George Floyd's murder, pepper sprays, smoke bombs, and burning cars made air and breath a site of spectacular violence. With chemical irritants burning eyes and lungs, city soundscapes were flooded with hoarse shouts, rasps, and wheezes.<sup>10</sup> So, too, environmental racism and classism determine who is nearer the chemical runoff or has the means to move away from the path of the forest fire's blaze or otherwise adapt to these declining ecological conditions.

As Dillon and Sze indicate, environmental racism and classism within the politics of particulate matter are an attritional violence. The inability to breathe clean air is a material effect of genocidal negligence in racialized and classed communities over long periods of time, more than just a metaphor for the stifling, unlivable conditions. In his expansion of Michel Foucault's biopower—that is, the workings of power on the ordering of life itself—Achille Mbembe offers the term "necropower" for the forces that control "the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions

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10. For more about the effects of these chemical entanglements during the protests, see Craig Bettenhausen (2020).

that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (2019:92). As D. Asher Ghertner points out, the atmospheric and necropolitical effects of climate change instill a sense of renewed connection between human beings vis-à-vis our need to breathe, even as the juridical categories of urban citizenship establish unequal conditions that determine who gets to live and who will die from environmental measures made by governments that purport an investment in the "greater good" (see Ghertner 2020). Necropolitical control of populations means that for communities of color in Louisiana's "cancer alley," Mexican citizens in San Cristóbal de las Casas drinking Coca-Cola due to lack of fresh water, and residents of smog-filled cities like Beijing, one's existence becomes defined by a relation to death, decay, and particulate matter's effects on the body (see Baurick et al. 2019; Lopez and Jacobs 2018).

Local jokes abound regarding these necropolitical conditions in Beijing: "The joke started with a driver calling a Beijing traffic radio station saying he was upset that he had just driven through eight red lights due to the thick smog. The radio host happily replied: 'Don't worry, dude. Thanks to the severe smog, the camera wouldn't take a clear photo of your license plate anyway'" (Vision Times Staff 2015).

*Dust Project's* investment in air as its mise-en-scène is reinforced by the Chinese understanding of *qi*. As Nguyen notes, "A foundational concept in Chinese medicine, *qi* denotes the essential life-sustaining force that undergirds and propels all things, human and non-human, animate and inanimate" (2020:456). *Qi* is not air, though air can be *qi*. Nguyen's investment in *qi* is a way to circumvent the reductive rendering of air as a flat signifier within positivist understandings. *Qi* points toward a complex and dynamic understanding of air in quotidian intra-actions and ways of life that generate meaning as people endure the atmospheres of contemporary living.

## Coda

### *I Wait for You at the Edge of the City, I Breathe and You Are with Me*

In Laurie Anderson's haunting 1981 classic "O Superman," she sings: "So hold me, Mom, in your long arms / Your petrochemical arms / Your military arms / In your electronic arms" (Anderson 1982). At a nodal point of elongating and ever-tightening petrochemical arms, *Dust Project* shows the local and far-reaching impacts of particulate matter pollution. The World Health Organization estimates that 7 million people die prematurely from air pollution each year, and that 99% of the world's population breathes air that exceeds healthy pollutant levels (WHO 2022). With *Dust Project*, Nut Brother works at the nexus of the particulate and particular conditions that Beijing's residents experience while also appealing to a global community vis-à-vis the dramatization of smog pollution's materiality. Nut Brother's *Dust Project* regards a praxis of "being human," which Katherine McKittrick explains:

Being human [...] signals not a noun but a verb. Being human is a praxis of humanness that does not dwell on the static empiricism of the unfittest and the downtrodden and situate the most marginalized within the incarcerated colonial categorization of oppression; being human as praxis is, to borrow from Maturana and Varela, "the realization of the living." (McKittrick 2015:3–4)<sup>11</sup>

Being human is an articulation of what it means to *live* and *last* as a doing, a performance of endurance. Rather than establishing a universalist rhetoric of atmospheric and human relations that smudges out the specifics of environmental difference, Nut Brother's *Dust Project* spotlights the necessity of a global environmentalism that accounts for the nuances of local knowledges as well as unjust effects on people's lives.

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11. Katherine McKittrick here refers to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1980).

The tricky problem remains that we are of the air and it is of us. I do not state this to evoke a “hippy-dippy” sentimentality regarding our relationship with air, but, rather, to accent the need for an effective and affective public political ecology that entails a multiscalar internationalist front based on collective actions. As *Dust Project* shows, the slow violence of breath that affects so many in Beijing and across the world is a bodily process of degradation and death. These enmeshments denote a union, an inextricable coming-together. Air is not a passive background or immaterial entity; air is not just an abstract “human right.” Instead, breathing is an active material-symbolic process of gases and guts. With an inhale, your matter is my matter. Given these conditions, we should all be shitting bricks.

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