

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL

ATMOSPHERIC SPACES

n. 3

ATMOSPHERIC SPACES

Directed by Tonino Griffero

Editorial Board:

Jean-François Augoyard (*CNRS – Grenoble*), Arnold Berleant (*Emeritus – Long Island University*), Mikkel Bille (*Roskilde Universitet*), Gernot Böhme (*Emeritus – Universitaet Darmstadt*), Christian Borch (*Copenhagen Business School*), Gabor Csepregi (*Université de Saint-Boniface – Winnipeg*), Christoph Demmerling (*Universität Jena*), Thomas Fuchs (*Universitätsklinikum – Heidelberg*), Michael Großheim (*Universität Rostock*), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (*Stanford University*), Jürgen Hasse (*Goethe Universität – Frankfurt*), Timothy Ingold (*University of Aberdeen*), Rainer Kazig (*LMU – München*), David Le Breton (*Université de Strasbourg*), Juhani Pallasmaa (*Helsinki University, Alvar Aalto Academy*), Alberto Pérez-Gómez (*McGill University – Montreal, Quebec*), Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (*University of Westminster – London*), Hermann Schmitz (*Emeritus – Universität Kiel*), David Seamon (*Kansas State University*), Giovanni Stanghellini (*Università “G. D’Annunzio” – Chieti; Universidad “Diego Portales” – Santiago*), Jean-Paul Thibaud (*CNRS – Grenoble*)

What is an “Atmosphere”?

According to an aesthetic, phenomenological and ontological view, such a notion can be understood as a sensorial and affective quality widespread in space. It is the particular tone that determines the way one experiences her surroundings.

Air, ambiance, aura, climate, environment, genius loci, milieu, mood, numinous, lived space, Stimmung, but also Umwelt, ki, aida, Zwischen, in-between – all these words are names hiding, in fact, the founding idea of atmospheres: a vague ens or power, without visible and discrete boundaries, which we find around us and, resonating in our lived body, even involves us.

Studying atmospheres means, thus, a parte subjecti, to analyze (above all) the range of unintentional or involuntary experiences and, in particular, those experiences which emotionally “tonalize” our everyday life. A parte objecti, it means however to learn how atmospheres are intentionally (e.g. artistically, politically, socially, etc.) produced and how we can critically evaluate them, thus avoiding being easily manipulated by such feelings.

Atmospheric Spaces is a new book series whose aim is to become a point of reference for a community that works together on this philosophical and transdisciplinary subject and for all those whose research, more broadly, is involved in the so-called “affective turn” of the Social Sciences and Humanities.

ATMOSPHERE/ ATMOSPHERES

Testing a New Paradigm

Edited by Tonino Griffero and Giampiero Moretti

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL

© 2018 – MIMESIS INTERNATIONAL
www.mimesisinternational.com
e-mail: info@mimesisinternational.com

Book series: *Atmospheric Spaces*, n. 3

Isbn: 9788869771231

© MIM Edizioni Srl
P.I. C.F. 0241937030

CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>by Giampiero Moretti</i>	9
INTRODUCTION <i>by Tonino Griffero</i>	11
THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE TIME OF THE EGO-SPHERES <i>by Flavia Cuturi</i>	15
ATMOSPHERES OF AND IN GEOGRAPHY <i>by Libera D'Alessandro, Rosario Sommella and Lida Viganoni</i>	31
TECHNOSOCIAL ATMOSPHERES: MIGRATION, INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND TWITTER <i>by Adele Del Guercio, Maria Anna Di Palma and Tiziana Terranova</i>	47
ECONOMIC ATMOSPHERES <i>by Amedeo di Maio and Salvatore Ercolano</i>	63
SOMETHING MORE. ATMOSPHERES AND PATHIC AESTHETICS <i>by Tonino Griffero</i>	75
SOME NOTES ON ATMOSPHERES AND FINANCIAL MARKETS <i>by Antonio Lopes and Lucio Gaeta</i>	91
NORTHERN AMERICAN ATMOSPHERE (CANADA, ALASKA, GREENLAND): ECUMENE AND NORDICITY IN CANADA, CLIMATE CHANGE AND GEOSTRATEGIES IN THE FAR AND EXTREME NORTH <i>by René Georges Maury</i>	99

E LUCEVAN LE STELLE. ATMOSPHERIC, POETIC AND MUSICAL SYNAESTHESIA <i>by Federica Scassillo</i>	111
THE CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATIONS AND ATMOSPHERES IN INSTALLATION ART <i>by Elena Tavani</i>	129
AUTHORS	147

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATIONS
AND ATMOSPHERES IN INSTALLATION ART

by *Elena Tavani*

Superabundant Atmosphere (2013) by Jacob Hashimoto is an installation of kite-like structures that appear to float or swarm in response to air movements, a “superabundant” rustling cloud that raises restless qualities in the site.¹ The American artist, based in New York, is not new to this type of site-specific intervention that makes use of rather ethereal but strongly stratified and dense elements, which in their general super-abundance generate natural indoor phenomena, meteorological or cosmic, such as sky, clouds, or, more recently, an *Eclipse* (2017). The accumulation and the gigantism render the structure oppressive in its entirety and yet, once the space below is crossed, i.e. when one is literally directly below the cloud, it dissolves and we perceive its mass as a metamorphic play of hundreds of identical kites at the mercy of currents of air, while below our feet the light reflects their whimsical trembling. The expanded and nevertheless contained character of the installation, airy and looming at the same time, ‘tonalizes’ it atmospherically in an ambiguous way – but it is precisely this that brings the visitor into play, as a physical body-in-movement “and” as a felt-body, affectively receptive, so that each time it once again becomes its centre of gravity, the mobile and temporary reagent of the atmosphere generated by the changing body of the installation.

It is on this plane of interest, which identifies the aesthetic experience beginning with the effective presence and the embodied perception of a subject, that we can find in the “aesthetics of atmospheres” some theoretical support that is important in the identification of “a qualitative specificity of appearance, inexistent beyond the perception of the work” (Griffero 2010a, 9), which the experience of an installation work certainly cannot but set out to gather, given its various environmental and immersive features.

1 The installation is site-specific and was created for the Rice University Art Gallery, Texas; <http://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibition/jacob-hashimoto-superabundant-atmosphere/11824> (accessed 08/12/2017).

From the 1980s onwards a new generation of artists, critics and curators (more specifically the various declinations of what are known as ‘relational aesthetics’) has investigated the currency or lack of currency of institutional formats – work, museum, exhibition – seeking to personalize them and lead them to attempt a relation with the audience. With multimedial installations there is a full affirmation of the idea of the work-cum-environment, a work that envelops the viewer. Thus we react to these installations as though reacting to an environment into which we enter.

A consideration of the aesthetic and situational particularity of the installations inevitably leads us to consider that in this type of device we are certainly involved with “settings”, montages and stagings, but also with ‘responsive environments’ that although often following the elementary grammar of stimulus–response, involve an ‘affective interaction’ with whoever in that moment ‘inhabits’ the environment of the installation, an interaction played out on an inter-subjective and somatic plane.

In a certain way the ‘aesthetics of atmospheres’, in particular in the version elaborated by Gernot Böhme, measures itself precisely with the two frontlines of this research, which leads us to seek in these pages to verify, albeit at an exemplificative and approximate stage, the specific contribution of phenomenological ‘atmospherology’ to the understanding of contemporary installation art.

The perspective adopted by Böhme – chosen here as a paradigmatic exponent of the aesthetics of atmospheres – presents at least two central features that we can indicate synthetically in the following terms: a) on the plane of an aesthetics of reception: a contrasting oneself with the perceptive situation in the ‘affective’ situation and the stress placed on the overall, total, effect of a space or a representation beginning with the presence of the percipient; b) on the plane of an aesthetics of the production of a tendency to consider the construction of atmospheres in terms of a staging.

Own-body as felt-body

The notion that finds itself at the centre of the affective involvement envisaged in the perception of atmospheres is the ‘felt-body’. In perception, Böhme maintains, we cannot but require “the experience of the felt-bodily presence” (Böhme 2001, 39). Both presence and perception were already inherent to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of bodily-own. What such a notion of ‘own-body’, lays down with emphasis is the instance of a necessary ‘presence’ of the percipient within the perceptive situation, evidently in

disagreement with the philosophies ‘of consciousness’, understood, in the widest sense, as the capacity to reflect on one’s self and on the world without any necessary direct reference to concrete experience and to feel oneself to be part of a situation in a pre-reflexive way. As occurs in Merleau-Ponty’s work, in Böhme’s theory of perception too the assertion of the centrality of the existence of the subject means the centrality of its being ‘embodied’ in the reality that surrounds it, thus also its ambiguous status as subject-object. Having introduced these very general premises, we understand above all that when Böhme defines the aesthetics of a general theory of perception he is focussing the enquiry on perception as the relation of body and world and not as the acquisition of perceptible data on the part of a subject that adopts a distance from those data. On this basis it becomes possible to rename the “perceptible quality” of things such as ‘synesthesia’, i.e. as atmospheric features: thus it is that “hardness”, “lightness”, etc. are referred no longer to single objects or to single sensations but to the primary aesthetic experience of a perception of atmospheres (Cf. Böhme 2001, 99).

The idea of a felt-body conceived as expression of the ‘self embodied’ had thus already been highlighted by Merleau-Ponty (in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945), speaking of own-body to indicate the natural self and true subject of perception.² Perception that responds to the own-body is in Merleau-Ponty a condition of all exchange with the world and of all knowledge: “We have experience of the world [...] as an open totality” (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 212) and “we have relearned to feel our body” (*ibid.*, 206). The experience of the body teaches that “perception provides me with a ‘field of presence’ in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions” (space and time) (*ibid.*, 265) and to consider “the world as perceived”, so that “the theory of the body is already a theory of perception” (*ibid.*, 203). For the same reason “the spatiality of one’s own body” (*ibid.*, 98) as ‘bodily-space’, involves “a knowledge of place which is reducible to a sort of co-existence with that place” (*ibid.*, 105). Since it is “a space embedded in existence” (*ibid.*, 148), one’s own body provides “ambiguous perceptions” that prove useless for an “analysis of the perceptual field” (*ibid.*, 281).

For Böhme the experience of the felt-body however places more emphasis on an affective situation that is halfway between ‘sensation of’ and ‘mood’: a point of aesthetic focus fundamental for each of us, given that it is with the affective situation as point of departure that I succeed in “perceiving the world in its significativity, utility, menace, etc” (Böhme 2001, 80). Compared to Merleau-Ponty there is in this reposposal of the

2 Böhme himself remarks on this (Böhme 2001, 77).

concept of an ‘embodied experience’ a decided ‘pathic’ intensification of perception, and a particular insistence on the localized character of the perceptive experience a feeling oneself and finding oneself in a place, with a consequent centrality of the dimension of space as theatre, we might say, of the production of atmospheric phenomena.

When Gernot Böhme talks of atmospheres, one of the aspects that in my view is most relevant is the circumstance – anticipated in the title of an important collection of lessons (*Atmosfera, estasi, messe in scena*) – of the extremely close link identified between atmosphere and scenic presentation. At the centre sits the construction of atmospheres, considered as the “specific task of aesthetic work”, and their reception considered as the characteristic art experience within a situation that presents itself as “free from the urgency of action” (Böhme 2001, 187-188).³

Böhme insists on the construction of atmospheres as the institution of a *skéné*, as a “space separated” from the world (*ibid.*, 119), but also on the modalities of access (above all by ‘ingression’ or ‘discrepancy’) to an atmosphere as to “a space that is emotionally tonalized” (*ibid.*, 47).

Here at least two questions open up that touch closely on the theme of atmosphere in installation art. The first regards, to express it in an abbreviated form, the phenomenological status of the atmosphere as “total-perception”. The second question instead concerns the eventual relation of the ‘constructed’ atmosphere with the theatricality, with the staging.

Totality

Let us come immediately to the first question identified as characteristic of the experience of atmospheres, i.e. to the matter relating to that which we can call the feature of “total-perception” of the atmosphere. The approach, Böhme specifies, seeks to be synthetic and not analytic:

In the tradition of the theory of perception synesthesia are treated in exactly the opposite way, namely in view of their individual sensory components, thereby presupposing their number and diversity. We decidedly represent a different view, i.e. we move in from perception in general, from the integrative phenomena, and then only gradually and analytically uncover the variety of senses and their

3 This is an underlining that is proposed as a variant or atmospheric reformulation of the well-known theory of aesthetic experience as an experience ‘separate’ from the active dimension of life, according to the formulation provided by Hans Georg Gadamer through the notion of aesthetic “differentiation” (Gadamer 2004).

specific phenomena. Initially we must assure ourselves of the following: we have to base our exploration on such experiences in which atmospheres as such – possibly in their purest form – are a given. (Böhme 2013, 23)

So as such the atmosphere “concerns such situations of perception in which one is, as seamlessly as possible, confronted with a new total. We are quite accustomed to such situations through artificial perceptual settings, namely scene changes in the theatre or by the cutting technique in film” (*ibid.*). On this basis he also affirms that atmospheres “are primary objects of perception”, being “a general atmospheric impression”, or “an overall impression” (*ibid.*, 24, 29).

According to Böhme in other words situations manifest an atmospheric status at the moment in which qualities of various types, felt for example as “vastness”, “seriousness” or “tension”, are neither assumed abstractly nor accepted as simple specific sensations, but are rather perceived-in-situation, in their “current” efficacy, inseparable from the situation underway.

Böhme is interested in establishing an order of priority of atmospheric perception in the phenomenological perspective and in this sense an independence for it compared to sensorial perception. The gnoseological and epistemological presupposition applied here is that the whole is greater than its parts and is able to determine them. Analogously, here the total or entire perceptive datum that we feel in the ‘ingressive’ experiences (we go to the beach, we cross the threshold of a gym, etc.) presents a dominant affective tonality that can then be felt as referable also to the single objects perceived within the space in question.⁴

Construction

Moving now to the second point highlighted by Gernot Böhme, the one relating to the construction of an atmosphere, the framework of the argument regards its production as a scene, i.e. as “a space for appearance.” (Böhme 2001, 119).

Such reasoning is also appropriate, and indeed to a greater extent, for architecture and design, which Böhme defines as powerful ‘generators’ of atmospheres (*ibid.*, 178). This appears valid within two perspectives.

4 Böhme maintains that from the phenomenological priority of perception-affect he is able to deduce a specific ontological status of the ‘atmospheric’, described in terms of “quasi-objective mood” (Böhme 2013, 25). This is a complex matter that cannot be dealt with here. On this issue see Griffero 2013, 15-17.

From an objective point of view: “since the physical context has its own ambience, the building is a kind of device for producing a particular atmosphere within another one” (Wigley 1998, 24). Thus with its presence an architectural element is able to make us feel, by discrepancy, the natural atmosphere of a landscape – a hill for example, or an urban landscape in which a building is located – that we may have been inclined not to notice. Within the subjective perspective, we owe to the perceptive discontinuity (or separateness–theatricality) of something the accentuation of its character of ‘effectual reality’, for example of a building or an object, i.e. its reality “in that” it is perceived and felt affectively (Böhme 2001, 56; Griffero 2010b, 23).

In answering the question of what art is, “on the horizon of an aesthetics as aisthetics”, i.e. a theory of the felt experience and not a theory of the work of art, Böhme aims with decision on the distinction between the apparent effectual reality of a space and its physical reality. With this point of departure, he maintains that “the social task of art may consist in thematizing effectual reality as such, thus making the experience of appearance possible” (Böhme 2001, 187). In particular, it is therefore necessary to note that modern art has led to materiality, the own-body and atmospheric-event dimension prevailing against “form”, symbol and sign (*ibid.*, 31-32). Alongside a perceptible “shift from the work to the performance” (*ibid.*, 187) is a confirmed direction in contemporary art, including installation works. As in the case of James Turrell’s spaces that “produce experimental perceptive situations, which anyway lead us only to discover or rediscover the perceptive modalities ultimately implicit in daily life” (*ibid.*, 58), Böhme considers the construction of atmospheres as an ‘aesthetic job’ that corresponds to rhetoric in the classical sense, designed to produce a precise effect on the reader or observer, capturing his or her attention. This is an aspect, that of intention, which in his opinion moves to a secondary level compared to the “planning” of a space or of an object, but which nevertheless becomes central when the object or the space manifest an explicit aesthetic aim, as in design, in scenography and so on.

But are we sure that the ‘question of form’, a problem initially posed by classicality and then a pet subject of modernism, has now been definitively archived and that it has made way for the “question of good living”? Asked about this matter, Gernot Böhme responds reasonably that the two problems are not at all exclusive alternatives, given that, for example, the “functional forms” created by Loos at the Bauhaus and classical forms “have never on their part renounced the generation of atmosphere and radiation (*Atmosphäre und Ausstrahlung*)” (Böhme 2008, 109). Indeed,

with atmospheres being not simple ‘auras’ but “spaces qualified by a certain emotive tonality” (Böhme 2001, 47), ‘tuned spaces’ (*gestimmte Räume*), and forms not being mere forms, but forms capable of acting, of having effects on the subjects that enter into contact with the objects in question, it comes about that it is precisely the form itself (for example concave or convex) that grants the space in which it is located a certain *Stimmung*. In short, the form/atmosphere alternative does not seem to be at all mutually exclusive. This fact assumes even greater significance in the case of installations with a form that is interwoven with the character of the event and of the exhibition and thus presents as an “offering” to the audience of given technical-environmental stimuli.

This way of setting out the aesthetic question through the aesthetics of atmospheres certainly has the merit of introducing an absolutely central role for factors related to experience – passivity, dependence on things and situations, the ‘pathic’ and the emotions – that have long been discredited in the tradition of western and modern thought. Regarding on the other hand the possibility of usefully applying the categories of aesthetics to the atmospheres of art installations, we can certainly say that ‘ingressivity’ is one of the most appropriate atmospheric categories for art installations. Furthermore, the experience that I can have on entering into the ‘dedicated space’ of an installation is doubtless marked by a central relevance of my own-body, and therefore by the link between my finding-myself-in-a-place and my feeling affects of some type, obviously including the perception, more or less clear, of an atmosphere (Böhme 2001, 78).

“How is atmosphere constructed?” Mark Wigley asks himself in an essay dealing with Frank Lloyd Wright: “Atmosphere seems to start precisely where the construction stops” (Wigley 1998, 18). Wigley reminds us that for Frank Lloyd Wright it was already clear that atmosphere is primarily related to the total effect of an environment or a situation, with its invisible climate or its mood. Wright, on his part, “saw himself as an architect of atmosphere” (*ibid.*). In his first article of 1854 he insists that

The sum total of ‘house’ and all the things in it with which we try to satisfy the requirements of utility and our craving for the beautiful is atmosphere, good or bad, that little children breathe as surely as the plain air. (Wigley 1998, 18)

For the architect all this evidently involved the necessity of a special integration of the elements present in the project: “Wright repeatedly argued that a good atmosphere is produced by integrating every single detail according to a singular vision” (*ibid.*, 19). Significantly, Le Corbusier

himself described the development of a quality which he termed ‘ineffable space’, related to architectural works:

When a work reaches a maximum of intensity, when it has the best proportions and has been made with the best quality of execution [...], a phenomenon takes place that we may call ‘ineffable space’. When this happens these places start to radiate. They radiate in a physical way [...]. (Wogenscky 2006, 81)

A contemporary installation that recalls Le Corbusier’s ‘ineffable space’, through an atmospheric play of transparencies and suspensions, is *Red Staircase* by Do-Ho Suh, acquired by Tate Modern in 2011. This work displays the outside of a red nylon staircase suspended from the ceiling. Suh creates fluctuating and spectral architectures that, as in the case of *Seoul Home/ L.A. Home* (1999; 2002) or *Perfect Homes* (2012),⁵ “clothe” their space: immersive systems, located in the walking space or suspended above, programmed to elicit an environmental response on the part of the visitors. An affective response, but also kinetic and interactive. The artist explains: “when you expand this idea of clothing a space, it becomes an inhabitable structure, a building, a house made of fabric” (Corrin and Kwon 2002, 37). An inhabitability that is largely affective or atmospheric, if we consider the fact that the structures are in many cases, including *Red Staircase*, raised above ground or located on the floor above the visitors’ circulation space an inhabitability obtained through a double strategy: a spatial dislocation that renders the architectures, prevalently domestic, a malleable space, marked by personal features and memories⁶ and an aesthetics of material (silk, polyester, stainless steel) in contrast with the ‘factual reality’ of the architecture – that even when it foresees transparency, turns to rigid and not soft materials such as cloth. In particular, the suspended houses of Do-Ho Suh significantly recall some drawings of F. Lloyd Wright, thus described by Mark Wigley:

In a 1935 drawing of *Fallingwater*,⁷ the sky is drawn as a series of parallel wavy blue lines that echo the shape of the building and trees. It appears to be

5 <https://worldarchitecture.org/architecture-news/cchen/do-ho-suhs-perfect-homes-shows-the-thin-nature-of-structural-models.html> (accessed 7/12/2017).

6 <http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/do-ho-suh> (accessed 7/12/2017).

7 Frank Lloyd Wright, *Fallingwater*. E.J. Kaufmann House, Mill Run Pennsylvania 1935. Perspective – The sky as the wavy aura of the building, in F.L. Wright, *Collected Writings*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, vol. 3.; Taschen; <http://www.arch.mcgill.ca/prof/klopp/arch678/fall2008/3%20Student%20exchange/M1%20Aaron%27s%20Studio/M1%20reader/Wigley,%20Daidalos%2068,%20Architecture%20of%20Atmosphere.pdf> (accessed 7/12/2017)

an atmospheric aura produced by the design. [...] The air becomes a suspended plane like those that define Wright's architecture. This plane is not simply a backdrop that pushes the features of the project forward. It is an integral part of the building. (Wigley 1998, 20)

The capacity of the aerial and spectral architectures of Do-Ho Suh to generate architectural atmospheres equal to their capacity to concentrate the surrounding air as a 'natural' material of the installation is not unlike what occurs in the drawing described above. But the same transparency that in Wright functions as a mechanism (the *Fallingwater*) to suspend the building, to lighten it of its weight and integrate it with the natural landscape, in Do-Ho Suh creates a suspension that nourishes itself to become a phenomenology of evanescence or the architectural ephemeral and plays hide and seek with the aesthetics of immersion and the perceptive-affective vibration.⁸ Above all, in dealing with suspended architectures, perception must indeed reckon with the physical distance of the living body of the installation that cannot but influence the emotive physiognomy of the experience that we have of it, rendering it for example oneiric, but also ironic, with the inevitable effect of breaking the spell of a total immanence. In general, we can indicate as what we might call the typical affordance of an installation work the invitation to interaction that is extended to the audience. If this, however, does not want to reduce itself to an empty formula, it will have to be specified each time in its prevalent tonality, which may however travel in different directions and elicit a *partage* of an atmospheric type, but also, for example, somatic, technomimetic, "engaged".

After all, in installation works such as these cited, it seems to me that the immersive and environmental character of the aesthetic experience offered by the installation above all does not allow itself to be described in terms of a separation between its 'effectual reality' and its 'physical reality' (Böhme 2001, 160-161). The factual fact/actual fact pairing picked up on by Böhme to mark the corporeal-affective actuality of atmospheric situations, does not configure alternative dimensions (*ibid.*) for the installation, be they either subsequent – so that the installation is 'factual fact' when it is inert and with the lights switched off, 'actual fact' when it is switched on for its visitors – or doubtless co-present, given the importance of the physical structure conferred to the installation environment.

8 To be recalled here the American group, *Light and Space*, launched in 1960 by Robert Irwing.

It is difficult to maintain, it seems to me, in approaching installation art overall, that primacy of perceptive experience that imposes on the “constative-experimental” experience that it remain out of consideration, which would introduce extraneous factors (concepts, judgements, tendency towards analysis, but also observations relative to the physical factors of reality) in an affective-perceptive experience that one seeks to have within a pathic and emotive cocoon. The techno-perceptive nature of the installation does not allow this.

Situations

There is no doubt that the atmosphere/theatricality nexus is not a new idea and it dates back at least as far as Gottfried Semper.⁹ What has changed is if anything the stress placed on the staging of things in terms of situation.¹⁰

A “classical” reflection on this theme, with important “drifts” in the social and political direction, comes to us from Situationism, which has also coined the term ‘psychogeography’, to mark the affective sense that is tied to the change of places. In a 1955 text by Debord the ‘atmospheric’ formulation of consideration of architecture and of the city appears more than evident:

The word ‘psychogeography’, suggested [...] as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate. It is not inconsistent with the materialist perspective that sees life and thought as conditioned by objective nature. [...] Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. (Debord 1955, 23)

In essence, “the sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few meters” involves “the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres” (quoted in Wigley 1998, 24). Actually the Situationists tried “to redefine architecture as pure atmospherics” and “devised numerous ‘psychogeographic’ techniques to carry out this analysis” (*ibid.*) to impose a new psychogeographic architecture on the

9 Cf. Semper 1989. “A long tradition of architectural theory suggests that architecture is never more than [...] a theatrical effect. [...] Architecture is but a stage set that produces a sensuous atmosphere” (Wigley 1998, 20).

10 Tonino Griffiero significantly defines atmospherology as a special declension of a “philosophy of situations” (Griffiero 2010a, 35).

traditional city, thanks to “constructed situations”, considered as changeable décors. Debord, however, though at first he “promoted this ‘ambience city’”, later rejected it, arguing that society “has started to mold its own décor, more or less everywhere” (*ibid.*, 25).

From this development of the Situationists’ reflections we acquire something interesting for our research journey. The Situationists suggest that in the construction of atmospheres the ‘setting’ in the theatrical sense constitutes only a beginning of this construction, which eventually must achieve concrete form in a situational actuality that is shared and is intersubjective (Cf. Nieuwenhuys 1997). This also involves a re-dimensioning of the role of the artist’s “rhetoric”, which cannot bear fully the weight of the construction of atmospherically characterized situations (Böhme 2001, 53).

In general, it may be possible to put forward a reservation regarding the theory of perception regarding the aesthetics of the atmospheres examined here by saying that it (perhaps) suffers from a formulation that is too clearly reactive, i.e. that leads it to define itself ‘in reaction’ to ‘sovereign’ and ‘spontaneous’ reflection – to the autonomous and rational subject theorized by modernity (see Griffero 2010b, 30-33). With an overload of functions that comes to rely on the own-corporality as source and wellspring of every renewal and purification not only “beginning” with the feeling-oneself-to-exist and by the affective situation, but to the exclusion of every other *non* aesthetic-emotive factor or example, factors that are active in the praxic and planning sense. This aspect tends to be present, on the atmospherological horizon considered here, only within the ethical perspective that is associated with a renewed being-nature. And this renders the objective of providing “a pragmatic point of view” within the forms of life and human awareness itself (Griffero 2010b, 30) not fully distinguishable from the plane of a general affective intention.

If, for example, I am led to collocate the perception of atmospheres as ‘semi-things’ in a “pure actuality”, even if this reveals my intention to give weight to the external forces that determine me and come to me (Böhme 2001, 62), nevertheless the terminology used will be declined so as to purify as much as possible the own-body perception and affective perception of elements that are considered spurious (i.e., not purely perceptive, such as concepts or sensible qualities), which in reality can only with difficulty be held on the margins of an experience that one wants to be pre-reflexive because non-analytic – but not, I presume, because it is empty of concepts, etc.

Understandably, it is the “distancing perception” of something that must be kept away from the atmospherological perceptive horizon, if that which must emerge as a priority is the ‘pathic’ factor of the experience

(Böhme 2001, 63). Instead, what does not seem fully productive is the decision to describe the atmospheric experience as opposed to pragmatic aspects considered, for example, in the form of activation of actions – single or collective – and not only of behaviours assumed on the basis of an emotively qualified lived experience.¹¹

So if, also in the wake of some suggestions deriving from the Situationists' positions, we seek to consider the atmospheric not only as fundamentally linked to perception and feeling or as the effect of a "spatial" or environmental force, but in its possibly pragmatic significance, then the 'situation' comes to be defined not only as primarily 'affective' but such as to always foresee, within a 'responsive' attitude towards an elicitation, an entering into and 'active' exchange at various levels with the environment or the context. If we then refer more closely to an 'active response' that as viewers we can give to environmental 'tonalities' or elicitations such as those that are available to us in an art installation, it is possible to identify a 'situational force' of the installation work that is produced from a practical point of view as a tendency to "norm" a given content of experience.

In this regard it can be useful to refer to the notion of 'affordance' introduced from ecological psychology by James Gibson. The theory of 'affordances' maintains that there is no environmental perception that prescind from the feeling of that which the environment offers, renders available (affords to) the animal in the very moment in which it perceives the environment, i.e. the entirety of the 'surfaces' that separate the substances from the medium in which they are immersed and in which the animal lives. "I've described the environment as the surfaces that separate substances from the medium in which the animals live" (Gibson 2015, 119). Gibson's "radical hypothesis" on the matter of environment and perception is that "values' and 'meanings' in the environment can be directly perceived" and perceived as "external to the perceiver" (*ibid.*). Thus "the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (*ibid.*). For instance, "if a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal [...] sufficiently extended [...] and if its substance is rigid", again relative to the size and weight of the animal, "then the surface *affords support* [...]. It is therefore walk-on-able and run-over-able" (*ibid.*). Affordance "implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment" (*ibid.*). But what does Gibson mean

11 In a different perspective Richard Shusterman has understood the pragmatic dimension linked to corporeal experience as specifically creative (Shusterman 2008, 126).

here by ‘complementarity’? I believe that substantially Gibson seeks to suggest that everything which produces ‘affordance’ with regard to a single being is non-neutral with regard to the effective production of an action or a behaviour of the animal, in the sense that it tends to induce it, it invites the animal to act or behave thus-and-thus. The animal, in other words, is not insensible with regard to a certain ‘offering’ that can come from “medium, substances, surfaces, objects, places and other animals” insofar as they “have affordances for a given animal” (Gibson 2015, 134). Indeed, “They offer benefit or injury, life or death. This is why they need to be perceived” (*ibid.*).

On this basis perception becomes an extremely serious thing, if a ‘misperception’ can lead a terrestrial animal to mistake quicksand for sand or lead a human being to strike its head on glass, mistaking it for air. Unlike common perception, generally used to classify an object, perceiving an ‘affordance’ means perceiving the object as a “value-rich ecological object” (Gibson 2015, 132), an object that is not “value-free”, non-neutral with regard to the use that we can make of it or the meaning that we can attribute to it. In other words, perceiving an affordance consists of having access to information on the external environment that also involves a specification of the perception of one’s self.

An affordance, as I said, points two ways, to the environment and to the observer. [...] This is only to reemphasize that eteroception is accompanied by proprioception – that to perceive the world is to coperceive oneself. (Gibson 2015, 132-133)

Gibson’s theory of affordance presents various points useful for thinking about the atmosphericity ‘constructed’ by the installations. Firstly there is the attention that is directed to what we might call the ‘compatibility’ of information-offering on the part of the environment and of response-performance by the observer. In other words, affordance does envisage an aesthetic-vital level of feeling and acquisition of environmental data, but not disjointed from a pragmatic plane (and not only aesthetic) of response to that input. A second central aspect, still connected to the first point, is the circumstance that evidently a standard response to the environmental affordance is not envisaged, but rather a potentially differentiated and sometimes creative response to the solicitation that is made available, also on the basis of the characteristics and the conditions (not least ‘pathic’) in which a given individual and a given audience find themselves.

Bodies and islands

Böhme proposes atmospheres as ‘intermediate phenomena’ between the subjective pole and the objective pole of a situation (Böhme 2001, 55). The distinctive trait of the indistinctness that defines the “intermediate” nature of atmospheres allows Böhme to oscillate methodically between ‘atmospheric characters’ and ‘dispositions of the spirit’, according to whether one seeks to put the stress more on the objective pole or on the subjective-egological pole of the atmospheric phenomenon, albeit that the atmospheres cannot but prove to be “co-constituted [...] in their character by the subjectivity of the percipient.” (*ibid.*, 54). In no case can we consider for these semi-things any distinct permanence of their presenting in the ‘actuality’ of the perception (*ibid.*, 62). This is after all – it is best to remember this – a very specific ‘actuality’, which cuts out an ‘effectual reality’ of feeling in that it is distinct and distinguishable from the ‘physical reality’ or factual reality of a situation. In short, the effect counts more here than the fact.

Now to me it seems that this underlining remains functional to the preservation of an “individual measure” in the feeling and evaluation of atmospheres that also tends to manifest itself in terms of the ‘insularity’ of the percipient’s pole, despite its being co-determined from the exterior. In discussing the ‘characters’ of atmospheres, Böhme names among others the “dialogic” atmosphere as characterizing a communicative situation (*ibid.*, 51), in spite of the fact that the construction of an atmosphere is said to imply the production of a *Stimmung* as something “intersubjective” (*ibid.*, 126).

In short, it seems that the socially shared dimension of the world does not provide Böhme’s perceptological research with a specific coefficient of analysis of perception, but only a ‘genre’ of atmospheric content in the general sense, to be inserted into a general repertoire, although they are distinct, as features that indeed indicate ‘social’ atmospheres, from those of a more sensorial type (heat, light, etc.).¹² Nor does it seem to be envisaged for the ‘objective pole’ to constitute itself not only as a world of things, but as a plurality of other, co-percipient subjects, each equipped with its own-body, but for this reason not refractory to a lived experience or to emotions felt as shared. Or better, such subjects are envisaged, but if each is uniquely own-body, and the stress falls exclusively on the ‘own’, the consequent overshadowing or formal noticing of the body in the physical

12 “We had mentioned the communicative characters as a further group: i.e. those that characterize communicative situations, such as tense, quiet, hostile, etc.” (Böhme 2013, 25)

sense inhibits every possible ‘bodily expression’, i.e. every appearance or exhibition that may bring a spectator into play. Thus, while Böhme’s vision reinforces the centrality of the “passivity” that Merleau-Ponty had already understood as a manifestation of a primordial “exposure” to the world, the same thing does not happen with regard to the presence of others and to each percipient subject’s being exposed not only to affective intensity, but to the gaze of others. A circumstance this that Merleau-Ponty did want to include within the “experience of my existence” seen in light of the paradoxical dialectic “between the Ego and the Alter Ego”: “I do not discover merely my presence to myself, but also the possibility of an ‘outsider spectator’” (Merleau-Ponty 1981, XII). This involves plurality and suggests that “each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions” which means also “of disagreements and agreements” (Latour 2005, 15).

It is true instead that for Merleau-Ponty the idea of an “embodied subjectivity” becomes the basis for defining a notion of ‘intercorporeality’¹³ that more usefully, in my opinion, reduces the aesthetic insularity of the single egological poles and which I think is particularly productive if applied to the aesthetic experience of installation art. Indeed, it is not unusual for co-presence, interaction and sharing to constitute the form of the realization of the work as the form of its self-presentation. This duplicity generates the specific paradoxicality of the installation work, which on the one hand tends to transform technically the sensorium of the audience and on the other, to borrow Böhme’s terminology, produces an atmospheric ‘ecstasy’ poised between a genuine effect of presence and the ‘aesthetic’ programming of a mechanism regulated according to the dictates of an “economy of experience” (Cf. Böhme 1995)

There remains the fact that in the installation work the viewer is free to move within the gallery and it is foreseeable that his or her own-body perception be in any case interwoven with that of the felt-body and that of the physically moving body. In this regard I believe it is useful to note how – unlike the rigid distinction fixed by Böhme between own-body and physical body – the physical dimension of the body strongly influences its percipient being in its also being perceptively aware of itself and of others on the basis of an intentional inter-corporeality and therefore also aware of the variations in affective tonality that render themselves available in the installation.

13 On the role of imagination in defining Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality see Vanzago 2018, 169.

If we consider the device of the installation specifically as site of the exercising of a power of repositioning and re-ordering of objects and situations, it appears evident that here we are dealing with a ‘biopower’, given the living character of contexts and situations, and that therefore the planning as a design for a possible journey is offered not only as a “rhetorical” indication or prescription, but rather as a guide-device capable of suggesting ‘on demand’, so to speak, “new” orientations within experiences of daily objects and situations.

It seems to me that something of this kind might be said in the case of Rachel Whiteread’s *Embankment* (2005). Here the solidity of the volumes arranged in the installation space seems to leave very little room for evanescence. Whiteread selected various differently-shaped old boxes to construct the installation for the Turbine Hall. She filled them with plaster, peeled away the exteriors and was left with perfect casts. Afterwards she had them re-fabricated – thousands of them – in a translucent polyethylene which reveals a sense of an interior.¹⁴

This play on external-internal gives the tone to the entirety of Whiteread’s imposing sculpture, which winds along a route that now and then assumes architectural traits (corridors, labyrinths), rendering the freedom of movement and action of the visitors akin to an invigilated freedom. This contributes to granting the installation strong character in the atmospheric sense, also due to the fact that the embankment of the title seems to refer precisely to the flow of visitors engaged in crossing through the hall. This remodulates the interaction – firstly intercorporeal – of the audience, called to respond, kinetically and affectively to the alternating solicitations of the installation, in a regimen of structures that are imposing yet nevertheless seductive due to the dazzling candour and variety of the assemblages, which at each turn in the route elevate themselves into cumuli of unpredictable forms and masses. Here subjects and objects, become reciprocally ‘ecstatic’ in Böhme’s sense, i.e. such as to “come out of their selves”, giving life to a play of appearances in which the own-body feeling and the somatic action – which is the carrying out of actions and movements that are not entirely predictable within the space shared with the other visitors – appear separable with considerable difficulty.

14 <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibitionseries/unilever-series/unilever-series-rachel-whiteread-embankment-0> (accessed 5/12/2017)

Bibliography

- Böhme, Gernot. 1995. *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot. 2001. *Ästhetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*. München: Fink.
- Böhme, Gernot. 2008. "Die Atmosphäre". In *Von der guten Form zum guten Leben. 100 Jahre Werkbund*, ed. by M. Andritzky, 107-114. Frankfurt a. M.: Anabas-Verlag.
- Böhme, Gernot. 2013. "Synesthesiae within the scope of a Phenomenology of Perception". *Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, International Journal of Architectural Theory* 18, 31: 21-33. http://cloud-cuckoo.net/fileadmin/issues_en/issue_31/article_boehme.pdf (accessed 10/12/2017).
- Corrin, Lisa, and Kwon, Miwon. 2002. *Do-Ho Suh*. London: Serpentine Gallery.
- Debord, Guy. 1955. *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*. <https://urban-emotions.ru.uni-kl.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2015/04/Debord-1955-Introduction-à-une-critique-english.pdf> (accessed 7/12/2017).
- Gibson, James. 2015. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1986). New York-London: Taylor and Francis.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and Method* (1960). London-New York: Continuum.
- Griffero, Tonino. 2010a. *Atmosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Griffero, Tonino. 2010b. "Introduzione. Dal bello all'atmosferico: un'estetica dal punto di vista 'pragmatico'". In *Atmosfera, estasi, messe in scena*, G. Böhme, 5-33. Milano: Marinotti.
- Griffero, Tonino. 2013. *Quasi-cose. La realtà dei sentimenti*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Nieuwenhuys, Constant. 1997. *New Babylon. Art et Utopie. Textes situationnistes*, ed. by J.-C., Lambert. Paris: Cercle d'art.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public". In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. by B. Latour and P. Weibel, 4-31. Cambridge (MA)-London: The MIT Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1981. *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). New York-London: Routledge.
- Semper, Gottfried. 1989. *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (1851), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2008. *Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Vanzago, Luca. 2018. "Intersubjectivity and Imagination. On Merleau-Ponty's Conception of Intercorporeality as Foundation of Community". In *Imagination and Social Perspectives. Approaches from Phenomenology and Psychopathology*, eds. by M. Summa, T. Fuchs, and L. Vanzago, 167-180. New York-London: Routledge.
- Wigley, Mark. 1998. "Die Architektur der Atmosphären/ The Architecture of Atmospheres". *Daidalos* 68: 18-27.
- Wogenscky, André. 2006. *Le Corbusier's Hands*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

MIMESIS GROUP
www.mimesis-group.com

MIMESIS INTERNATIONAL
www.mimesisinternational.com
info@mimesisinternational.com

MIMESIS EDIZIONI
www.mimesisedizioni.it
mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it

ÉDITIONS MIMÉSIS
www.editionsmimesis.fr
info@editionsmimesis.fr

MIMESIS COMMUNICATION
www.mim-c.net

MIMESIS EU
www.mim-eu.com

