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Atmospheric *dispositifs* relational entanglements and fields of engagement



Werner Ruhнау and
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(1982–1985) [Photo © Izabela
Wiczorek (2014)]

The adoption of the French term *dispositif* ('device') as a catalyst for the present musings is not accidental. It alludes to Michel Foucault's notion of apparatus, something that transcends its merely technical connotations. Namely, an apparatus is understood as a "strategic ensemble" or "system of relations" between "heterogeneous elements" of both a discursive and a non-discursive nature, the visible and the invisible, between physical forms and processes, and its role in thinking about space as an active element, as a means of operation of social power and of control exerted over the body; as a device of knowledge production and action.¹

In this regard, the coupling of *dispositif* with atmosphere is not arbitrary, for the latter similar to *dispositif* "can arise from the free interplay of heterogeneous elements" – as Sigfried Giedion already noted in his accounts on mechanisation in the mid-20th century, when the term "atmosphere" was not yet so firmly embedded in an architectural discourse. However, what is at the stake here is that Giedion intuitively identified atmosphere also with "intensity":² We might say, a particular intensity of affect that connotes specific bodily responses, if we refer to intensity in a Spinozian sense.³

Consequently, if we approach atmosphere as a dynamically engaging spatial phenomenon, one that conjuncturally acts as a detonator of action and interaction in both individual and collective terms, then the space wherefrom it emerges needs to be discussed as a relational milieu. Namely, a *dispositif* that draws out the dynamics of everyday life and experience, translating them into a graspable form, and shaping these relations through specific pre-scripted sensuous encounters.

Alongside these conceptual frameworks, this study aims at revealing agency implicit in architectural materializations, offering an expansion of the operational field of architecture through relational entanglements between theory and practice. Added to this must be a reconsideration of medium specificity and the transformation of disciplinary boundaries in thresholds that enable the emergence of what Rolf Hughes defined as "transverse epistemologies".⁴

The intended argumentation has a twofold dimension. Firstly, through the scrutiny of the

notion of atmosphere as a spatial phenomenon, the aim is to reflect upon its implications for architectural production. That is, to explore ways of thinking and shaping reality, this through relations that acknowledge a complexity of the material universe disclosed through human and non-human as well as material and immaterial forces. It also aims at rendering how this context emerges from the integration of other disciplines, thus fostering a reconceptualization of perceptual experience and a redefinition of spatial epistemologies.

Secondly, in doing so the objective is to expand the range of knowledge of atmospherics, presenting it as a material practice as well as arguing that despite the fact that it has flourished over the last few decades, strongly influenced by writings of contemporary philosophers such as Gernot Böhme, or Peter Sloterdijk – to mention but a few – the conceptual foundations and protocols for the production of atmosphere might be found beneath the surface of contemporary debates.

Moreover, unlike many accounts of atmosphere, which primarily revolve around its perceptual dimension from a theoretical standpoint, this study focuses on what might be denominated as techniques of the atmospheric. That is, it aims at providing an inventory of tools and methodologies deployed in the production of atmosphere, exploring a multiplicity of conditions that constitute their resonant origins – i.e. the production sites from and within they have emerged. Nevertheless, the aim is not to compose a linear historiographical narrative, neither to present a complete atmospheric taxonomy. The intention is rather to use selected works and practices as instruments for illuminating what has remained overlooked or hidden – i.e. for mapping the fleeting shadows of forgotten knowledge.

Accordingly, among many examples that might be identified with proto-atmospheric praxis, it is the oeuvre of German architect Werner Ruhнау that comes to the fore as paradigmatic for illustrating previously outlined assumptions. Situated broadly within the field of trans-disciplinary collaborations, Ruhнау's work operates on a number of levels, or rather within intermediate realms. That is, between the material and the immaterial, art and architecture, body and environment, action and performance, promoting what his friend and collaborator Hugo

Kükelhaus – philosopher, artist and educator – defined as "differential states of experience":⁵ Along these lines, joint projects with artists such as Yves Klein – with whom Ruhнау worked initially on "aerial architecture" – or Adolf Luther – who searched for a method for rendering the impalpable – create a laboratory for decoding the meaning of atmospheric *dispositifs*.

Through the analysis of selected works and processes and their theoretical and historical contextualisation, the aim is to reveal how aforementioned collaborations led Ruhнау to think about space as a contingent construction and field of engagement. Namely, to engage with new possibilities of experience by exploring its perceptual and social dimensions through a playful evolvement of space, in which movement and action are orchestrated by variable spatial configurations and material strategies.

In conclusion, since the central theme of this paper is the productive entanglement between heterogeneous elements, disciplines and processes, the intention is to present atmosphere as a site of co-production open to contingencies and affective interplay on multiples levels: at the moment of its conceptualisation, at the moment of its construction, and, finally, at its emergence – converting those immersed in it into co-producers through bodily and social engagement.

- 1 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, ed. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194–198.
- 2 Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanisation takes command. A contribution to anonymous history* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 499, 303.
- 3 Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 278.
- 4 Rolf Hughes, "The Art of Displacement: Designing Experiential Systems and Transverse Epistemologies as Conceptual Criticism," In *Footprint*. Delft School of Design Journal. Agency in Architecture: Reframing Criticality in Theory and Practice no. 4, ed. Kenny Cupers and Isabelle Doucet (2009): 49–64.
- 5 Hugo Kükelhaus, *Inhuman Architecture*. From Animal Battery to Information Factory, trans. Elmar Schenkel (Auroville: Studio Naqshbandi, 2007), 15.