

/// THE CABINET OF [ATMOSPHERIC] CURIOSITIES.

A Journey in Search of the Origins of Atmospheric Practice

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‘For me atmosphere is a materiality that exists between objects, distorting plastic values. Instead of making it float overhead like a puff of air (because culture has taught me that atmosphere is intangible or made of gas, etc.), I feel it, seek it, seize hold of it and emphasize it by using all the various effects which light, shadows, and streams of energy have on it. Hence, I create the atmosphere!’

Umberto Boccioni, 1913¹

Curiosity not only denotes a desire for discovering something new, but, as suggested by the philosopher Michel Foucault, is ‘a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now, and what is disappearing.’² With the notion of **atmosphere** becoming a focal point across different disciplines and domains of cultural production, this project aims to disclose its hypnotic allure. It is a work-in-progress that represents the urge to systemise the constantly evolving knowledge on spatial atmospheres and urban ambiances, exploring their multiple meanings, clarifying conceptual categories, tracing their origins and fields of application, as well as reflecting on experiential, cultural, societal, political, and environmental implications of atmospheric production.

Embedded in the notoriously ambiguous nature and a twofold dimension of atmosphere—meteorological and aesthetic—is a desire to bridge polarities as well as to challenge familiar associations—such as the poetics and glamour of the ethereal—which pervade architectural discourse. Although ‘culture has taught [us] that atmosphere is intangible’, as noted by the Futurist Umberto Boccioni in the quote opening this paper, ‘atmosphere is a **materiality**’.³ Indeed, it is ‘a materiality that exists between objects’, an immersive experience. Boccioni’s words certainly unfold as an argument for consideration of atmospheres as material formations. Yet, written in 1913, they also suggest that although concerns for atmospheres have only recently crystallised into an influential transdisciplinary debate, the conceptual foundations and protocols for the production of atmospheres can be found beyond contemporary examples. Despite the established assumption that the history of architecture has largely neglected its atmospheric component, as claimed by the anthropologist Tim Ingold, both intuitive resonances and explicit associations with

atmosphere exist in a multiplicity of theoretical and historical accounts as well as projects.⁴ From Joseph Paxton and Charles Fox's Crystal Palace designed for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and recognised in its time as 'perhaps the only building in the world in which *atmosphere* [was] perceptible', to a movie palace typology known as the 'Atmospheric Theatre' promoted in the late 1920s by John Eberson, to Frank Lloyd Wright's 'set of golden rules' for the construction of a 'vital atmosphere' in domestic interiors, to Situationist practices that inspired a series of urban actions and installations entitled 'Immersion' from 1967 onwards by a key figure of the Italian Radical Design movement Ugo La Pietra, these and other examples provide clear evidence to support this claim.⁵ Consequently, the increasing interest in atmospheres, often referred to as an *atmospheric turn* and associated with the last few decades, is not new, but rather newly significant.⁶ It can be seen as a re-*turn* to the principles which have over centuries shaped what might be termed an *atmospheric awareness*. Mapping the rise of this particular atmospheric sensibility and revealing the forgotten or unexplored history of atmospheric production defines the framework for this project. It provides a platform for both trans-historical and trans-disciplinary correspondences, tracing new and, at times, unexpected relationships between works written, built or imagined in the past and the contemporary theories of atmosphere. The project also aims to challenge the boundaries between architectural design, history and theory, offering an opportunity for combining traditional modes of historical research with design-led-research, curatorial practice and artistic production.

In this sense, *The Cabinet of [Atmospheric] Curiosities* lies somewhere between indexation and speculation, a dialectical device and a generative instrument. Drawing from the fascination with curiosities cabinets or *Wunderkammern*—historically seen as a means of recording, classifying, and communicating knowledge through a collection of disparate artefacts—the project sets out a conceptual framework for a constantly-evolving and open-ended instrumental taxonomy of spatial atmospheres.⁷ It both looks into multiple ways in which atmospheres have been theorised and materialised and engages with the development of new tools, methods, and creative processes that define 'an active engineer of atmosphere'—to borrow Jean Baudrillard's definition.⁸

Through gathering and strategically arranging disparate atmospheric *samples*, *The Cabinet* aims to illustrate the complexity and nuances of the notion of atmosphere, revealing the wide range of ideas and motivations that triggered new conceptions, perceptions, and experiences of space. Often associated with the discovery of 'new worlds', cabinets of curiosities transcend, however, a mere accumulation of material evidence.⁹ Similar to atmospheres, cabinets of curiosities encapsulate the logic of **assemblages** in a Deleuzian sense.¹⁰ Thus, based on chains of unexpected connections and effects emerging from a juxtaposition of distant realities, cabinets of curiosities allow for an exploration of the imaginative potential, opening up a wide range of modes of engagement (individual and collective) with the material world.

Following such a logic, *The Cabinet* becomes both an investigative and performative medium; a vehicle for evoking atmospheric experience. It is a place where canonical works of atmospheric *staging* and engineering—some neglected and forgotten, some never realised and those that have been lost—are revisited, re-constructed or re-enacted.¹¹ Collected through readings, archival studies and field visits, material is carefully analysed and classified. Copyright protection is, however, a challenge for a collector who, similar to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century travellers and scientists exploring the world in the absence of photography, is forced to seek alternative visualisation tools for depicting the discovered *specimens*. Redrawn from source material and organised into a series of conceptual categories the selected examples constitute a visual survey, featuring a timeline as well as key reference and contextual information, highlighting their fascinating role in the historiography of atmospheres as well as reflecting on their position in relation to contemporary atmospheric practice.¹²

Yet, the documentary nature of the project is subverted by a creative *inhabitation* of the studied works, which are approached as territories for experimentation and invention. In doing so, *The Cabinet* becomes a site where histories and imaginary scenarios co-exist and overlap, establishing multidirectional dialogues. Words, drawings, images and objects constitute an assemblage of both material and discursive traces, revealing the link between the analysis of theories and ideas and the exploration of conditions, actions, constituents, techniques, materials, forms, and processes underlying the production of atmospheres.

Unlocking material nuances of atmospheric production sets also the parameters for the assembly process of the actual *cabinet* proposed for the Works + Words Biennale. Similar to the cabinets of curiosities of earlier times, the display is not conceived as a static tableau that implies contemplative distance. A series of **optical instruments**, including lenses, glass cloches and reflective surfaces, transform *The Cabinet* into an immersive device, producing ‘perceptual, imaginative and intellectual intensification’.¹³

The development of the display is, therefore, underpinned by a historical research into curiosity cabinets and technologies of **immersion** (particularly stereography).¹⁴ Its translation into the physical display is framed by the practical explorations of the properties of glass and mirrors, which are regarded as the ‘most effective conceivable material expression of the fundamental ambiguity of “atmosphere”’.¹⁵ In this context, with their framing, channelling, multiplying or distorting qualities, glass and mirrors replace space as a static entity with a dynamic force-field. They recall Umberto Eco’s devices of ‘procatoptric staging’.¹⁶ As such staging devices, they activate different elements of the collection, choreographing a network of possible relationships. While stereoscopic devices transform images into three-dimensional scenes providing almost palpable experience of places, a series of lenses bring intimacy between the exhibited *specimens* and the observer. Both aim to stimulate an embodied process of attentive reading, encouraging an inquisitive journey in search of the origins and logic of atmospheric practice.

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- ¹ Umberto Boccioni, 'The Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting.' In *Futurism. An Anthology*, edited by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (Yale University Press, 2009), 140. First published in 1913.
- ² Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher'. In *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. Vol. 1, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 321-328: 325.
- ³ Boccioni, *op. cit.* 140.
- ⁴ Tim Ingold, 'Lighting up the atmosphere', In *Elements of Architecture. Assembling Archaeology, Atmosphere and the Performance of Building Spaces*, edited by Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen (Routledge, 2016), 163-176: 163.
- ⁵ Merrifield Mary Philadelphia, 'Essay on the Harmony and Contrast of Colours as Exemplified in the Exhibition', *The Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue: The Industry of All Nations* (London: George Virtue, 1851), I++-VIII++: II++, emphasis in original.
- ⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, 'The Architect and The Machine'. In *Collected Writings, 1984-1930*, Vol 1, edited by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 20-26: 21. First published in 1894.
- ⁷ Concerns for atmosphere have been growing since the 1980s in humanities and social sciences. Writings of Peter Sloterdijk and, particularly, Gernot Böhme's efforts to expand the meaning of atmosphere for contemporary aesthetics seem to be concurrent with the proliferation of artistic and architectural production labelled as 'atmospheric'.
- ⁸ The cabinet of curiosity, *studiolo*, *theatrum sapiente*, or *Wunderkammer* were collections of heterogenous artefacts and specimens that spread widely across Europe in the age of the Baroque. See, for instance: Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015).
- ⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London, New York: Verso, 1996), 26. First published in 1968.
- ¹⁰ Mauriès, *op. cit.* p.12.
- ¹¹ For the concept of assemblage, see: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). First published in 1987.
- ¹² For a notion of atmospheric staging see: Gernot Böhme, 'The Art of Staging as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres.' In *Atmospheric Architectures. The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* by Gernot Böhme, edited by Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 157-166.
- ¹³ Special thanks to the University of Reading Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme for making possible this endeavour, and to the students: Hafsat Usman and Marcus Perks for their collaboration and enthusiasm.
- ¹⁴ Barbara Maria Stafford, 'Revealing Technologies/Magical Domains.' In *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, edited by Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2001), 1-109: 6.
- ¹⁵ For the development of technologies of immersion see, for instance: Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (MIT Press, 1992).
- ¹⁶ Baudrillard, *op. cit.* 42.
- ¹⁷ Umberto Eco, 'Mirrors.' In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, by Umberto Eco (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 202-226: 220.