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AMBIANCES, ALLOÆSTHESIA: SENSES, INVENTIONS, WORLDS.

Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances.

Edited by Damien Masson

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Damien Masson

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Ambiances, Alloæsthesia

Senses, Inventions, Worlds

4th International Congress on Ambiances
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Edited by

Damien Masson

ambiances
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The Agency of Perception

A Perceptual Apparatus as a Tool for Critique and Subversion, Action and Mediation

Abstract. *By exploring a series of perceptual devices, which constituted a notable disciplinary expansion in the fields of art, architecture and design, particularly in the 1960s, the aim of this paper is to present apparatuses as instruments of embodied knowledge. The key proposition is that, situated in a liminal space between æsthethics and politics, perception and action, the discussed devices can be seen as tools of both critical analysis and radical intervention. They act as 'performative manifestos' which by acknowledging the agency of perception and by challenging conventions, reveal alternative spatial, somatic and societal realities, raising 'atmospheric awareness' and promoting a co-production of new ecologies.*

Izabela WIECZOREK[1]

Keywords. ***Perceptual Apparatus, Radical Practices, Immersion, Atmospheric Awareness***

Performative Manifestos

Taking as a point of departure, Karen Barad's definition of apparatuses as "dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances" (2003, 816, emphasis in original), the intention of this paper is to discuss the notion of a perceptual apparatus as a tool of both architectural critical analysis and radical intervention. That is, an apparatus that transcends its merely scientific connotations as well as quantitative logic, becoming instead a projective interface: qualitative, performative and affective.

Investigating and exploring such an apparatus should focus on its use as well as its design. In this sense, the design process is not, however, limited to a device as an *object*. Similar to Barad who defined apparatuses as "open-ended practices" (2003, 816), the Austrian artist and architect Walter Pichler described a whole series of devices and spatial interventions developed in the mid 1960s as *Prototypes*, suggesting "something from which something could later emerge" (Breitwieser and Pichler, 1998, 31). Additionally, what comes to the fore while thinking of perceptual apparatuses – for example the *Sensory Objects* (1966-69) of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark – is that they are situated in a liminal space between *propositions* and *actions*, in which the object acquires "meaning and structure only in the moment of direct bodily interaction with the spectator" (Brett, 1994, 61). Within their paradoxical non-utilitarian nature, the purpose of perceptual apparatuses, is to "manipulate phenomena in the same way that architecture does – using space, time, sound and materiality to interact with its audience in a performative relationship" (Lim, 2006, 006). Such apparatuses may include instruments of observation that define perceptual and conceptual boundaries for (self-)knowledge production, creation and action; and devices of defamiliarization

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that re-enact bodily and environmental awareness by challenging objective reality and by revealing expanded perceptual worlds and alternative spatial possibilities.

A key proposition here is that perceptual apparatuses can be seen as instruments of embodied knowledge, used to construct, test and communicate new arguments and radical thoughts by means of experience and reflection, opening up a wide range of modes of engagement (individual and collective) with the material world. They are thought- and action-provoking *performative manifestos* that by acknowledging the agency of perception, reveal the creative power of observing bodies, providing a critique of the limits and potentials of architecture itself.

The Generative Power of Observing Bodies

In *Techniques of the Observer* (1992), Jonathan Crary explores the vast field in which perception and its comprehension were transformed, tracing a particular taxonomy of visual apparatuses in which immersive experiences relocated vision within a "carnal density" (1992, 150), converting the human body into an integral and active part of visual machinery. Exploring the origins of that specific epistemological transformation, Crary stresses the important shift from the passive spectator to the *observing body* that becomes both receptor and producer, involved in a dynamic and kinæsthetic relationship with other bodies and surroundings. In this sense, the use of the term observer carries specific connotations. As Crary explains, etymologically, the term observer "means 'to conform one's action, to comply with'. (…) [A]n observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations" (1992, 5-6).

The varied devices considered in this paper constitute a particular family of apparatuses, in which conventions and habits are destabilised, perceptual thresholds are redefined, internal worlds are exteriorised, and human bodies mobilised. They represent a larger disciplinary expansion in the field of architecture and design, which notably occurred in the 1960s, overlapping with artistic practices of that time.

It was at the beginning of the 1960s that the visual arts, through performances and happenings, reintroduced the human body not only as a subject of representation but also as a medium of expression and a locus of experience. Within this new creative framework, body and perception became central to the artistic production of the aforementioned Clark. She is of interest here not only for her *Sensory Objects*, but also for the architectural analogies that strongly resonate in her work[2]. Following her belief that living in "architectural reality" is "To live in perception. To be perception in itself" (Clark, 1965, np), she developed a series of garments, armours and bodily envelopes that became "extensions of the skin" (McLuhan, 1964) – to allude to Marshall McLuhan's conception of clothing as media of communication that shape collective consciousness. However, rather than McLuhan's focus on clothing's codification of social order, Clark's bodily extensions shape collective (and political) consciousness through bodily involvement and interaction. In Clark's works, "[t]he new skin seems to use the body as a kind of medium or resounding chamber for registering its presence and innovation" (Best, 2005/2006, 94), challenging dichotomies of subject/object, mind/body, and individual/collective. Resonance, as noted by Jean-Paul Thibaud, "involves the ability of the body to incorporate and be affected by vibratory forces: its capacity to engage with, be penetrated by and participate in the actual ambiance"

2. *See, for instance: Fantastic Architecture Critters (1963), The House is the body, The Body is the House (1968-69), Biological Architecture Birth (1969).*

(Thibaud, 2011, np.). Accordingly, Clark's devices can be seen as tools for engaging with and transforming ambiance, exploring reciprocal capacities of affecting and being affected.

Clark's *Sensorial Masks* (1967), designed as a series of hoods with incorporated earpieces and nosepieces, shifted attention from visual to non-visual experience, stimulating olfactory, auditory and tactile sensations. Tactility was also pivotal to Clark's *Sensorial Gloves* (1968) and *Abyssal Mask* (1968), which through the enhancement of the sense of touch questioned inside/outside relationships. While the aforementioned hoods and other perceptual devices such as *Googles* (1968) manipulated or restricted sight, using coloured filters and mirrors, suits such as *Straitjacket* (1968) restricted the movement of the body. Through bodily manipulations, sight, touch, smell and hearing became paradoxically both communication channels with the external world and vehicles of introspection, giving rise to societal, political and technological re-configurations of the body. In other words, Clark's *Sensory Objects* were awareness-arousing apparatuses, enacting body's affective, transformative and generative capacities.

Interestingly, while analysing sensory thresholds defined by new technologies, McLuhan assigned to art a new role of programming "anti-environments" that entailed creating particular situations, raising awareness "of the environment, in which we live and of the environments we create for ourselves technically" (McLuhan, 1967, 165). Such an idea was pivotal to many of the devices developed at that time in the field of architecture and design, conceived as "vehicle[s] for opening up new horizons of consciousness and outlook on life" (Blomberg, 2014, 98), as noted by Günter Zamp Kelp, one of the founding members of Haus-Rucker-Co[3]. Moreover, in a similar way that Clark's 'propositions' stimulated affective participation in the world, entailing the rupture with the object and furthering the "dematerialisation of art" (Lippard and Chandler, (1968) 1999), Haus-Rucker-Co's apparatuses represented "a dismantling and redefinition of architecture" (Blomberg, 2014, 108). They were devices charged with a critical potential, questioning modernist disembodiment and self-referentiality. By intertwining pleasure and irony, they were both devices of resistance and devices of critique orientated towards a possible future, liberating the generative power of the felt-body.

In Search of Atmospheric Awareness

Not only did perceptual apparatuses require bodily interaction in order to come into being, they would not have worked without an existing context, as Ortner emphasised (Blomberg, 2014, 112). The purpose of these devices was to produce atmospheric resonances by bringing the body into a relation with the surrounding ambiance, drawing attention to atmospheric conditions and atmospheric imbalances. It is precisely attention that "builds into the gap of perceiving and re-acting" as noted by Siegmund Gerald in his analysis of the notion of apparatus (2009, 339). Through channelling attention – that is, through creating an 'anti-environment' by means of somatic alterations or dislocation of perception – perceptual apparatuses stimulated reflections on physical and perceptual forces embedded within the environment, replacing passiveness and inattentiveness with active engagement.
Many of the devices had a prosthetic character and were designed as a "mini-environment to be worn on the body" (Porch, 2009, 23). Known as *Environment Transformers* (1968), Haus-Rucker-Co's *Flyhead, Viewatomizer* and *Drizzler* were conceived as such

3. Haus-Rucker-Co was an avantgarde group founded in 1967 in Vienna by Laurids Ortner, Günther Zamp Kelp, Klaus Pinter, and later joined by Manfred Ortner.

bodily extensions. They were helmets or masks with incorporated sight-filters, lenses and/or headphones, meant to "alter sensory impressions" that are "very often taken for granted," regaining "a real contact with the world" (Porch, 2009, 23). Unfolding technological metaphors, many devices resembled a science-fiction costume prop as in Haus-Rucker-Co's *Electric Skin* (1968) that acted as both a transformative medium and a vehicle of communication. Others, such as Coop Himmelb(l)au's *Soul Flipper* (1969) and *White Suit* (1969), were conceived as sensorial activators, intensifiers of phenomena, and orchestrators of emotions. While *Soul Flipper* translated emotions into visual and auditory effects, *White Suit* expanded vision through olfactory and haptic sensations, translating it into bodily awareness. Other devices were conceived as immersive micro-environments which by dragging the subject into expanded perceptual worlds stimulated particular patterns of behaviour – like Haus-Rucker-Co's *Yellow Heart* (1967-68), or the whole series of installations and devices entitled *Immersions* (1968-71) by the Italian architect and designer Ugo la Pietra, belonging to the Radical Design Movement.

However, regardless of their character, perceptual devices were meant to develop "aggressive energies that influence people physically and psychologically" (Porch, 2009, 23) – as described by Haus-Rucker-Co in their *Mind Expanding Programme* (1967-70). By exaggerating, intensifying, and mastering the senses, they conditioned and modulated experience of the city, questioning architecture's social and environmental responsibilities. They were what La Pietra defined as an *Unbalancing System* – vehicles for subversion of the uniformity and normativity of the city, introduced into the urban fabric to induce moments of perceptive, behavioural and organisational imbalance.

La Pietra's objective was to destabilise the regulating powers of the city "by means of the analysis and identification of the environmental and social situations within which we found ourselves living, with a critical physicality" (La Pietra 1991, 15). For him the body was an instrument of interpretation and knowledge production, and his *Immersions* were certainly embodiments of that critical physicality; devices through which he attempted to break a "mummified" equilibrium or habit, and to "re-awaken the dulled imaginative faculties of the spectator and the citizen" (Dorfles, 1971, 3) of the citizens – as noted by Gillo Dorfles in the introduction to *Il sistema disequilibrante*. However, is that even though La Pietra's apparatuses employed immersion as a means to separate the individual from the surrounding ambiance – similar to Pichler's *Small Room* (1967) and *TV-Helmet* (1967) – they were meant to be relational devices. They were not merely perceptual tools, but spaces that offered themselves "as a point for critical and imaginative reflection on the context itself" (La Pietra, 1972, 226). That is, for "a real comprehension of the social and psychological conditions in which we are 'immersed'" (Trini, 1970, 30). As La Pietra explained, it was through disrupting the perception of reality by immersion and alienation that a critical reality was created and dynamic relationships set in motion, strategically pushing "toward a certain behaviour" (La Pietra, 1972, 226). In this sense, perceptual devices can be seen as instruments of atmospheric attunement, guiding not only ways of seeing the environment, but also showing potential for change. It was "an attunement of the senses, of labors and imaginaries to potential ways of living in or living through things" (Stewart, 2011, 453) – to borrow Kathleen Stewart's words.

In conclusion, not only tools of defamiliarization – a transgression of propriety or a critical resistance to sensorial regimes – perceptual apparatuses are, above all, instruments of embodied knowledge. They offer new ways of understanding design and knowing through atmospheres, exploring conditions, actions, and processes through which atmospheres are disclosed and to which they give rise. As 'dynamic (re)configurings

of the world', they render atmospheres not as fixed qualities of space and things, but as contingent, situational and relational, acquiring meaning only in the moment of the direct engagement of people with them. By intertwining critique and introspection, perceptual devices can also be seen as carriers of particular moods, invoking behavioural change. Thus, they are as much tools for raising atmospheric awareness as the actual generators of atmospheres.

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