

# Performing an Aesthetics of Atmospheres

Dr Stuart Grant  
Centre for Theatre and Performance  
Monash University

## Abstract

We are always in atmospheres. Every where has, is an atmosphere. We are always affected by atmosphere, more or less consciously, more or less intensively. A crowded street, an open field, night, a moment of anticipatory tension, a jubilant throng, the aroma of freshly-turned earth on a green hillside in the rain in the sombre stillness of a funeral, a post-coital haze, a boring seminar in a white box-shaped room. However neutral or benign a space is designed to be, however unconsciously or habitually dwelt, it has, it is, atmosphere. If space is anything more than volumetric void, ideal abstraction, or pure potential, it is atmosphere. Certainly, if space, as opposed to place, can be experienced, it is as atmosphere. This article outlines a phenomenological-performative methodology for the apprehension of atmospheres, based in the work of Hermann Schmitz and Gernot Böhme. It examines the concept of atmosphere in detail, and proposes a practical application in a site-specific performance project conducted in urban environments. Ultimately, it claims a role for performance phenomenology as a means of providing a more in-depth, body-centred analysis of the aesthetic experience of being in place than is attainable by other means.

## Introduction

In this article, I introduce a performative, practical, embodied, affective, experiential, phenomenological method for the measure of spatial atmospheres of urban places. I first examine the need for such an approach; second, define its sphere of applicability and field of activity; third, trace a theoretical history on which its assumptions are based; fourth, establish the performative origins of the method; and fifth, detail the practical phases and propose a project for its application.

I have mentioned measure, but I must stress in advance that it is a fundamental principle of the phenomenon under discussion that it is not available to measure as the concept is commonly understood. I do not mean the

kind of measure Heidegger describes as “stepping off” something known against something unknown to make it known and confine it “within a quantity and an order.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, this measure allows itself to be “guided by gestures befitting the measure here to be taken ... in a concentrated perception, a gathered taking-in, that remains a listening.”<sup>2</sup> This is a measure of dwelling by which the human body becomes the instrument of assessing the environment and experience of its own inhabitation. The means, the scope, the scale and the terms of this measuring will become evident throughout the article.

Jürgen Hasse writes: “The *experiencing* of a spatial environment is characterised by *emotional* participation. In its pathic form, such living experience is a feeling of being together.” This experience is not a knowledge, not analytical, but rather a matter of “feelings, instincts and affective impulses.”<sup>3</sup> Atmospheres are:

spaces with vital qualities that can be felt sensitively, cannot be analysed gnostically, but are to be perceived in their instant totality as atmospheres ... we relate ourselves to them, or live in them, seeking them out when they are attractive, or eluding them if they are cramped or threatening.<sup>4</sup>

Hasse’s conception contains a number of key guiding terms for this article and the methodology it proposes. First, the link between space and emotion; the experience is pathic rather than gnostic. It is about ‘being together’ – a social phenomenon. It is about ‘vital’ qualities, ‘felt sensitively’, and perceived as ‘instant totality’. It touches on instinct and impulse. Each of these terms carries a confusion of problems, vagaries, and indeterminacies. With current scientific methods, atmosphere is reduced to a vague relief against the salient entities that arise from it and constitute it. To approach it requires the development of new tools. In this article, I take up the tradition to which Hasse’s work belongs, add some definition and clarity to some of the terms he uses and the relations between them, and ultimately propose an investigation which achieves many of the goals that he considers necessary to apprehend the realm of emotional atmospheric experience.

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, “‘...Poetically Man Dwells...’,” trans. Albert Hofstadter *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, “‘...Poetically Man Dwells...’,” 223.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment: Embellishing the Cities from the Perspective of the Humanities,” in *Cities and Fascination*, ed. Heiko Schmid, Wolf-Dietrich Sahr, and John Urry (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011), 52-53.

<sup>4</sup> Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment,” 57.

To pay heed to the context of this journal issue, I would note initially that in this article the social aesthetics of atmospheres is understood very simply and literally: social, in that atmosphere has a social/cultural/historical/hermeneutic dimension; and aesthetic, in that it deals with sensation, perception, and affect – scales of feeling. As Hasse implies in the above citation, atmospheres are essentially social and aesthetic phenomena, rooted in the feeling of being together with the things and others in co-constituted space. An atmosphere is a felt, implicitly or explicitly shared experience, which, to reach fruition and emerge in its fullness, requires human bodies, exterior events in the surrounding world, and shared meanings and histories. Nevertheless, despite this role of the human in atmospheres, I should note that in what follows, the innovation lies on a much greater emphasis on the ways that the atmosphere of the place determines the experience of its inhabitants rather than the opposite, as would be the case in a sociological approach.

We are always in atmospheres. Every where has, is an atmosphere. We are always affected by atmosphere, more or less consciously, more or less intensively. A crowded street, an open field, night, a moment of anticipatory tension, a jubilant throng, the aroma of freshly-turned earth on a green hillside in the rain in the sombre stillness of a funeral, a post-coital haze, a boring seminar in a white box-shaped room; always permeated, suffused with atmospheres of elation, boredom, shame, sadness, concentration or disinterest. However neutral or benign a space is designed to be, however unconsciously or habitually dwelt, it has, it is, atmosphere. If space is anything more than volumetric void, ideal abstraction, or pure potential, it is atmosphere. Certainly, if space, as opposed to place, can be experienced, it is as atmosphere.<sup>5</sup> And as

---

<sup>5</sup> Edward S. Casey has drawn a clear distinction between space and place, characterising place, on the one hand, as a lived experience, and space, on the other, as “volumetric void.” See: Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Whilst Casey’s clear phenomenological distinction has proven to be a powerful and productive clarification across disciplines of architecture, design, performance, environmental studies, geography, and philosophy, the work of Schmitz and Böhme, which underlies the thinking in this article, perhaps necessitates a re-approach to the question. There is a muddying of the waters with the suggestion that space—pure abstraction in Casey’s scheme—may have an experiential/affective/material dimension. It is necessary to examine whether the phenomena that Böhme and Schmitz are calling space and atmosphere might not be categorised as place in Casey’s reckoning. A detailed comparison of Schmitz’ and Casey’s ontology would be required to clarify this. At this early stage of the investigation, however, it seems prudent to acknowledge the puzzlement and

Hasse notes, atmosphere is felt, it is affective. So it is necessarily a question of aesthetics.

### **Hermann Schmitz and Affective Involvement**

Hasse applies a tradition which derives from postwar German phenomenology, beginning with the work of Hermann Schmitz, who challenges what he terms the “psychologicistic–reductionist–introjectionist” objectification according to which “the realm of experience is dissected by ascribing to each conscious subject a private inner sphere containing their entire experience.”<sup>6</sup> Schmitz asserts that since Democritus and Plato, the history of European human self-interpretation has been dominated by this mistaken conception. This inner sphere is an artefact with a long and complex history, having been variously described as soul, ego, self, mind, subject, and transcendental subjectivity. According to Schmitz, all of these terms are products of an identity through *self-ascription* by which the conscious subject gives account of itself and takes the objects of the world to itself. The problem with this self-ascription is that “it comes too late.”<sup>7</sup> It is the already constituted conscious self imposing itself on the situation, clouding the complex fusion of the five basic existential dimensions of ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘being’, ‘this’, and ‘I’ from which it emerges. This self-ascription posits and sustains itself as the dominant term in a duality of exterior and interior, subject and object.<sup>8</sup>

What gets lost from view, on these dominant perspectives, is the felt body with its quite specific dynamics, rhythms of stirrings and corporeal movements, and its ways of being constantly involved in the manifold forms of holistic sensing of situations – rich modes of experience that cannot adequately be narrowed down to perception by means of the sense organs.<sup>9</sup>

---

lack of clarity and begin the phenomenological work anew.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann Schmitz, Rudolf Müllan, and Jan Slaby, “Emotions Outside the Box – The New Phenomenology of Feeling and Corporeality,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10:2 (2011): 247.

<sup>7</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, “Emotions Outside the Box,” 248.

<sup>8</sup> No doubt, there is a tendency towards his theme of the dissolving of the subject-object polarity throughout the history of phenomenology: in Levinasian *living from...*, Dufrenne’s *quasi-subjectivity* of the aesthetic object, Merleau-Ponty’s *flesh* of the world, and Heideggerian *Being-in-the-world*; but in Schmitz and Böhme and subsequently in Hasse, in the context of the study of atmospheres, it attains a new prominence and radicalisation.

<sup>9</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, “Emotions Outside the Box,” 244.

To remedy this, Schmitz proposes a system based in a dynamic elaboration of the Husserlian differentiation between the material body (*Körper*) and the living body (*Leib*). In Schmitz' system, *Leib* becomes the 'felt body', which is held in 'affective involvement', "an immediate, pre-reflective, not yet articulated self-consciousness."<sup>10</sup> Affective involvement happens through processes of 'contraction', 'expansion', 'vital drive', 'corporeal communication', and 'encorporation', by which the felt body is engaged in 'atmospheres', 'situations', and 'surfaceless spaces' in the 'primitive present'. These terms upon which Schmitz' system is built are the scaffolding of a complete refiguring of the ontology of what it means to be a person. Their full understanding far exceeds the scope of this article. The pertinent point here is that Schmitz uses them to construct a system which figures the conscious subject not as a pre-existent interiority, soul, psyche, brain, or self, but as the *a posteriori* residue of "being affected by and involved with what goes on – an involvement both realised and mediated by corporeal feelings that in turn make manifest (disclose) goings-on in the environment."<sup>11</sup>

Schmitz argues that these experiential affective involvements are overridden and ignored by the physical sciences for the sake of working with readily measurable, useful entities. The experience of wind becomes a question of movements of air pressure and direction; the question of illumination becomes a paradox of waves and particles. He questions the tendency to a "high-horsed belief in a monopoly of mathematical and physical space, to look down upon surfaceless spaces as poetic illusions or metaphors for a vague sense of feeling."<sup>12</sup> His vast *System der Philosophie*, as yet untranslated into English, and consequently yet to establish its full impact, seeks to remedy this situation. Still, in Germany, Schmitz has influenced a new generation of philosophers and is becoming more frequently cited by English speaking scholars in areas of ethics, environmental studies, architecture, aesthetics, ontology, education, and psychology.<sup>13</sup> Most pertinent here is his

---

<sup>10</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, "Emotions Outside the Box," 244.

<sup>11</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, "Emotions Outside the Box," 244.

<sup>12</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, "Emotions Outside the Box," 255.

<sup>13</sup> For example: W. Langewitz, "Beyond Content Analysis and Non-Verbal Behaviour – What About Atmosphere? A Phenomenological Approach," *Patient Education and Counseling* 67:3 (2007); Jan Slaby, "Affective Intentionality and the Feeling Body," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7:4 (2008); Thomas Fuchs, "Temporality and Psychopathology," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 12:1 (2013), originally published online (2010) doi:10.1007/s11097-010-9189-4; Madalina Diaconu, "Patina-Atmosphere-Aroma: Towards an Aesthetics of Fine Differences," in *Analecta Husserliana* vol. XCII,

influence on Gernot Böhme, who further develops the concept of atmospheres and places it at the heart of his “New Aesthetics.”

### **Gernot Böhme and the Aesthetics of Atmospheres**

In this remainder of this article, I will give some indication and definition of the terms of Böhme’s radicalisation of the concept of atmospheres and outline how it can be used to inform a practical, site-specific performance methodology. Böhme traces the diversion of aesthetics from the study of perception and sensation to its current status as the site of theories of taste – from Baumgarten, to Kant, and ultimately Hegel with whom “[a]esthetics ... completely abandoned the field of sensual experience and affective understanding.”<sup>14</sup> Although Böhme finds some remnant of concern with sensory perception at the core of Baumgarten’s work, he accuses Kant as the instigator of an aesthetics that has become:

a question of judgment ... the question of the justification for a positive or negative response to something ... to facilitate conversation about works of art. It supplies the vocabulary for art history and art criticism, for the speeches at exhibitions and prize givings and for articles in catalogues. Sensuousness and nature have in this fashion disappeared from aesthetics.<sup>15</sup>

The aesthetics of atmospheres aims to rectify this shift, to rehabilitate aesthetics as *aisthesis*, making it “a general theory of perception”:

The Aesthetic of Atmospheres ... rehabilitates Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s initial point of departure, i.e. Aesthetics as Aisthetics, as a general theory of perception. It has in the meantime proven its revelatory power by way of a series of case studies – the atmosphere of a city, light as atmosphere, the atmosphere of dusk, the atmosphere of church spaces, on music as atmosphere, and finally in the study of the atmospheres involved in interpersonal communication.<sup>16</sup>

---

ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005); Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics,” *Thesis Eleven* 36:1 (1993).

<sup>14</sup> Gernot Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics,” *Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* 1:1 (2000): 15.

<sup>15</sup> Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept,” 115.

<sup>16</sup> Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” 15.

Böhme has also applied the aesthetics of atmospheres in the fields of urban design, architecture, ecology, and theatre scenography.<sup>17</sup> He further recommends its worth to studies of advertising, cosmetics, and all aspects of design. Most ambitiously, he envisages the aesthetics of atmospheres as the core of a new discipline of General Aesthetics that would include, but not be limited to, the study of art.

[A] response to the progressive aestheticisation of reality ... aesthetics represents a real social power. There are aesthetic needs and an aesthetic supply ... to the aesthetics of the work of art we can now add ... the aesthetics of everyday life, the aesthetics of commodities and a political aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

The aestheticisation of the everyday is a central theme of Böhme's work. For him, the social is a fundamentally aesthetic concern and *aisthesis* is central to the understanding of human sociality through the pathic coming-together of corporeal communication. The close imbrication of the social and the aesthetic elements in the realm of atmospheres is complex and multi-layered. In advanced technological capitalist societies, the aesthetic dimension of commodification and social order are densely intertwined. It is not difficult to comprehend the importance of the manipulation of atmospherics in the contemporary political landscape. People are swayed emotionally by the sound of politicians' voices, their aura of confidence, their appearance. The atmosphere of Obama is tangible: his race, his cool, his vocal cadence, the rolling, relaxed swagger of his gait, the aura of hope which swept him to the presidency, and the atmosphere of resignation which has descended on his presidency.

---

<sup>17</sup> Most of Böhme's work is yet to be translated into English. His primary work in German on atmospheres is *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995). A small selection of articles pertaining to different applications of the aesthetics of atmospheres have been translated. See: Gernot Böhme, "The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres," [http://www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMB8-conf\\_GBohme-eng.pdf](http://www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMB8-conf_GBohme-eng.pdf); Böhme, "Acoustic Atmospheres.," Gernot Böhme, "The Atmosphere of a City," *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics* 7 (1998); Gernot Böhme, "Aesthetic Knowledge of Nature," *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics* 5 (1997); Gernot Böhme and John Farrell, "An Aesthetic Theory of Nature: An Interim Report," *Thesis Eleven* 32:1 (1992).

<sup>18</sup> Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept," 125.

A general atmosphere of cynicism and mistrust surrounds politicians throughout the Western world. The tea-party movement, which swept conservative America in the early 2000s, aroused and fed off an atmosphere of militant discontent and patriotic fervour. Its very name evokes an atmosphere. “Market sentiments” of consumer and business confidence fuel the value of companies and the wealth of nations. In democracies, people vote emotionally rather than rationally, often from a sense of traditional belonging, or on the basis of media manipulation of the atmosphere which surrounds a leader. The billowing, choking clouds of dust and smoke as the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed engulfed America in a murderous atmosphere of fear, anger, and war. Our bodies are traversed, cut-through, and motivated by tides of drives and emotional responses whose origin escapes us but whose atmospheric force determines our actions to a significant degree. As Schmitz puts it, “emotions are atmospheres poured out spatially that move the felt (not the material) body.”<sup>19</sup> Atmosphere grips us, stirs us, oppresses us, buoys us up, threatens us, invigorates us. Laughter or anger can engulf a crowded room and turn an otherwise socially rational group of people into an intoxicated mob. Our relation to atmosphere is sometimes confused. We often regret decisions taken in the heat of the moment, considering them irrational, but even though we do not trust actions based on and taken in response to atmosphere rather than reason, we are indelibly affected by first impressions and gut feelings. We are easily seduced by a social swell of feeling, the pleasure of belonging, the indignant righteousness of a shared value, being in audiences, applauding and singing together, defining ourselves through local, national, cultural, and community identities. These atmospheric affective/emotional responses play a role in determining our reactions from the most personal to the most political. The study of the social dimension of the aesthetics of atmospheres provides a way into understanding these contagions.

The first task is to bring into focus tangible qualities and processes from the apparently vague and dispersed apprehension of atmospheres, and then to work towards an understanding of the specific ontology of atmosphere. The term atmosphere retains the etymological sense of *atmos*—the Greek word for steam—something indeterminate, nebulous, vaporous, indistinct. The reference to atmosphere usually means that there is an unknown, something difficult to grasp, which needs to be clarified. Atmospheres shroud. We know we are in them, we recognise them, we experience them, but we find it hard to locate their origin or source. They are diffuse. As Schmitz puts it, atmospheres are “without borders, disseminated and yet without place, that is, not

---

<sup>19</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, “Emotions Outside the Box,” 247.

localisable.”<sup>20</sup> We are immersed in atmospheres, intermingled with them, permeated by them. They promulgate through us, we move through them, carry them, convey them. We have rich vocabularies to speak about them, but ontologically they are problematic. Schmitz characterises them as surfaceless spaces. We cannot grasp their substance, their purpose, how they come to be. Their form, beginnings and ends are indistinct.

Böhme contends that this aura of indeterminacy arises because the subject/object distinction with which we understand our apprehension of the world is inadequate to the understanding of atmosphere. The ontology of atmospheres requires a major shift in thinking from the polarity of subject and object. Böhme turns to Schmitz, for whom the human being, before it can conceive of itself as subject, person, agent, or soul, is conceived essentially and originally as a felt body, given to itself spatially. Schmitz’ radical concept of affects and emotions—not as something internal which belong to the subject but which intrude from without—provides the basis for this rethink.

The ontology of the object also needs revision. Böhme notes that classical ontology conceives the thing ‘in itself’ as a closure. The qualities of the thing are thought of as determinations that limit it, define it, and separate it from other things. This way of thinking, he claims, is a “hostile hindrance” to aesthetics. He proposes that rather than conceiving of the blue colour of a cup as something that belongs to it, adheres to it, and determines its identity, that it would be more accurate to think of the blue as “something which radiates out to the environment of the cup ... the blueness is a way of the cup being there, an articulation of its presence.”<sup>21</sup> Böhme coins the term “the ecstasies of thing,” the ways in which it goes forth from itself. The measure of a thing is not merely the extension of its occupation of a given amount of space, but the force of its presence, its voluminosity, and its effect on its surrounding environment. So “atmospheres are spaces insofar as they are ‘tinctured’ through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations, that is, through their ecstasies.”<sup>22</sup> Atmospheres are neither something objective nor something subjective, but they are something ‘thinglike’ and ‘subjectlike’. They are affectively experienced. Atmospheres are the articulation of the presence of the environment, sensed bodily.

The fundamentality of this relationship between bodies, things, and space to the possibility of experience leads Böhme to assert:

---

<sup>20</sup> Schmitz, cited in Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept,” 119.

<sup>21</sup> Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept,” 121.

<sup>22</sup> Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept,” 121.

## *Performing an Aesthetics of Atmospheres*

[a]tmosphere designates both the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics and its central object of cognition. Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as, sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way.<sup>23</sup>

This new aesthetics circumscribes not merely something in-between an environment and an experiencer, but their very immersion, their element, their common ground. Atmosphere surrounds, includes, involves, envelops, and gives forth both the qualities of the environment and the experiencing human. There is no hierarchy of primordially here, no mere polar relation, but a “common reality.” It is impossible to be anywhere, or even simply to be, without atmosphere, and yet, in order to stand as atmosphere, a spatial arrangement needs to be experienced or imagined into being.

Schmitz categorises atmospheres under a new ontological category of “half-entities”, demanding a reconsideration of relations of cause and effect.

They immediately corporeally and affectively involve the conscious subject ... without a distinction between cause and mode of influence ... a holistic exchange of corporeal dynamics, a vibrant attunement to meaningful surroundings. Correspondingly, the world shows up ... as the atmospheric fields of significant situations, opportunities or quasi-corporeal forces ... that in the first instance become manifest to the conscious person in form of the ‘internally diffuse meaningfulness’ of holistic corporeal impressions.<sup>24</sup>

“Like the wind, voices, the sense of overpowering gravity, electric shocks, pain, a shrill whistle, an ear piercing noise, night, time,”<sup>25</sup> half-entities are not full things. Like full entities they are ‘out there’ in public space but their mode of existence is intermittent. A thing remains in its completion whether a perceiving body is present or not. A half-entity requires an affected body to reach fruition. An atmosphere spreads out, affecting a whole room but it needs bodies to experience it, bring it forth. Atmospheres are generally also social phenomena, felt and spread by more than one person, requiring completion.

An atmosphere is, in the first instance, neither an analysis, nor a totality of separate components, nor an exchange of signs, but an infusion that ultimately exceeds its elements. This is not to say that it cannot be reported and

---

<sup>23</sup> Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept,” 122.

<sup>24</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, “Emotions Outside the Box,” 256.

<sup>25</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, “Emotions Outside the Box,” 256.

described. But this work can only be achieved from within the experience. The body of the experiencer and the other tangible constituents of the atmosphere are not simply intertwined and dependent on each other; they constitute each other. The body and the surrounds belong to the atmosphere. There is no mediation, no objectification.

The architect Peter Zumthor writes:

I enter a room, and—in the fraction of a second—have this feeling about it. ... we perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensibility—a form of perception that works incredibly quickly ... we are capable of immediate appreciation, of a spontaneous emotional response.<sup>26</sup>

Böhme describes atmosphere as a “total impression,” which we have to enter to realise.<sup>27</sup> The apprehension of the atmosphere is immediate. The experiencing human is *of* the atmosphere – an affective, emotional resonance. The revelation of an atmosphere is the revelation of the experiencing body to itself; the experience of an atmosphere is a specific mode of the coming-forth of that body. Hasse cites von Dürckheim: “Lived space ‘becomes present in its corporeal and signifying totality, in each moment, as an overall positioning, an attitude, a directedness and a mood, which one has ... in his limbs and his feelings, his body and his heart’.”<sup>28</sup>

As already mentioned, despite the ontological indeterminacy and indistinctness of atmospheres, we have no problem taking about them. We habitually and easily refer to atmospheres in the most nuanced and detailed ways across all manner of ontological registers. Atmospheres of foreboding, mugginess, claustrophobia, cheerfulness, warmth, collegiality, damp, tension, authority. There are an infinite number of possible atmospheres. They blend into each other, interrupt, shift, intensify, dissipate, overwhelm, comfort, and intimidate. An aesthetics of atmospheres needs to speak from inside the experience. The turning towards it, from within the saying of it, instantiates it, or at the very least intensifies the experience of it. In describing an atmosphere of terror, if I describe the shadows, my prickling skin, shortness of breath, the howling wind, the march of soldiers outside the door, I induce the state of terror, even if only in a cathartic homeopathic dose.

---

<sup>26</sup> Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments; Surrounding Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Böhme, “The Atmosphere of a City,” 11.

<sup>28</sup> von Dürckheim, cited in Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment,” 55.

The experience of atmosphere, more often than not, unless extremely intense or suddenly changing, is not thematised as the principal object of perception. When I enter a room I am immediately affected by the atmosphere. It cuts through and emanates from my body, determining the volume of my speaking, my proximity to the others, though I do not proceed to a detailed analysis of its constitution and how it is affecting me. Knowledge of atmospheres is, in the majority of instances, an implicit/tacit knowledge. We live them, they permeate us, we experience them, respond to them, become shaped by them, but we rarely turn to them as thematised objects of perception. They function more as horizons; horizons which we carry, where the human body meets the environment, and things, and states of affairs issue forth in their characteristic modes.

Atmospheres are not fixed. As half-entities they constantly seek renewed completion. It is possible that the room I experience as cosy, you experience as claustrophobic, or that the place where I once felt loved and secure becomes the site of the heartbreak of my broken marriage, haunted by memories of a joyous atmosphere which now chokes me with the gloom and despair left in its wake. An empty room at the beginning of a party can be filled with expectation, a few hours later be resounding with the cheer of an intoxicated throng, and then become a scene of violence. The morning after, it might be pallid with sadness and devastation. These shifts can occur suddenly or slowly over time. The atmosphere of a room where I sit by myself will always be haunted by absent others who have affected it, and who, through it, affect me. As morning sunshine fades, clouds cast shadows and rain begins to fall, an oasis of rest and light turns desolate. To some extent, every time I experience an environment it changes, intensifies, or wanes. The involvement of body and environment is always shifting in a living corporeal communication.

### **Elements, Attractors, Atmospheres**

In the remaining sections of the article, I outline the terms and the practice of a performative methodology based on these principles; where the aesthetics of atmospheres—as temporally intermittent, immediately apprehendable, nebulous half-entities—can be used for the apprehension and reporting of the living experience of being in the city. In this, the challenge for the aesthetic worker is to gain understanding of “the connexion between the concrete properties of objects ... and the atmospheres they radiate.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept,” 123.

In a discussion of the work of garden designer C.C.L. Hirschfield, Böhme notes the *elements* by which the character of a locality is produced.<sup>30</sup> His lengthy citation from Hirschfield is worth reproducing here.

The gently melancholy locality is formed by blocking off all vistas; through depths and depressions; through thick bushes and thickets, often already through mere groups of (closely planted) thickly leaved trees, whose tops are swayed by a hollow sound; through still or dully murmuring waters, whose view is hidden; through foliage of a dark or blackish green; through low hanging leaves and widespread shadow; through the absence of everything which could announce life and activity. In such a locality light only penetrates in order to protect the influence of darkness from a mournful or frightful aspect. Stillness and isolation have their home here.<sup>31</sup>

Hirschfield is very specific about the emotional effects of certain elements, colours, materials, plants, water, stillness, movement, sound, stones, buildings, and shadows. Depressions, thickets, hollow sounds, and dull murmuring create an atmosphere of melancholy and mourning. This may seem a little over-determined and fraught with difficulties in predicting what the effect of an element might be in the presence of other elements to any given person from any given historical/cultural situation. Nevertheless, the importance of Hirschfield's work is that he analyses the elements that constitute atmospheres and deploys them in the creation of atmosphere for the experience of an implied audience. This is not about writing signs for a reader, but creating an experience. The garden is constituted as an embodied performance of atmosphere for an anticipated audience.

The idea of *elements* is a key methodological tool in what follows. It should be stressed that in everyday experience, these elements are not perceived singly and subsequently added up to objectify or understand the atmosphere – they are simply lived. The apprehension of atmosphere is an immersion in a totality. The analysis into elements is performed after the fact as a specific methodological device in the service of generating a performed, embodied report on the experience. Performing bodies can bring the elements together to regenerate and carry the original atmosphere.

The performance research methodology has its origin in a Bodyweather workshop in which I participated in 2001 at Alice Springs.<sup>32</sup> At that workshop,

---

<sup>30</sup> Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept," 124.

<sup>31</sup> C.C.L. Hirschfield, cited in Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept," 123-124.

<sup>32</sup> Bodyweather is a performance discipline with a heritage in Butoh. It was

the facilitator, Tess de Quincey, asked a cohort of performers to compile ‘A Dictionary of Atmospheres’. She proposed a methodology based in concepts of ‘attractors, elements, and atmospheres’. The performers began by simply walking through the landscape. They were instructed to follow placial attractors that drew their attention, to stay with those places, dwell there at length, and analyse the atmosphere of that attractor into elements. They were to select three of these places. What were the pertinent features of the place? What had attracted them to the place? De Quincey instructed them time and again to ignore their own feelings and emotions and concentrate on the place itself. They were to measure the place in terms of speeds, densities, textures, permeations, porosities, proximities, rhythms, scale, weights, directions, temperature, light, and other physical features of the place. They were to reflect on how these elements constituted the atmospheres. They were then to use the elements as material for performances. They were instructed to open their bodies to the elemental physical qualities and processes and find ways to perform them, to ‘take them up’. The Dictionary of Atmospheres was the collection of all their performances.

I wrote this from the workshop:

The Bodyweather practitioner stands on the threshold of the horizon which unfolds as the meeting of her body with the landscape in which she moves. And she begins to walk. As she walks, the horizon, shaped and proportioned by the frontality and verticality of her movement and perception, moves with her; the landscape as it appears to her changes its face as she faces it. As she walks, she opens to hear the call of the atmospheres of the places in which she moves. She opens to hear the call. The call of a moment in which the conaturality of the place and her body’s perception thematises itself as an attractor.

As a Bodyweather practitioner, she has spent time in training, preparing herself to be open to the attractors of the place. The shadow of a crevice, the tremble of a flower, the vastness of a sky, the brisk prickles of a bush, the swarming of ants, the folded texture

---

founded by Min Tanaka, who wrote: “when I dance, I don’t dance in the place, but I am the place,” cited in Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sékiné, *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Co., 1988). 75. Bodyweather has since become a growing, internationally practised site-specific performance methodology. See <http://bodyweather.net> for further information. Tess de Quincey—who devised the method of elements, attractors, and atmospheres outlined in this article—brought the practice of Bodyweather to Australia in the 1990s. She performed with Min Tanaka’s Mai-Juku company in the 1980s.

of a piece of bark, the silhouette of a gum tree against a dirty white sky at dusk, the space between grains of sand.

The Bodyweather practitioner, opened, softened, sensitised by the day's MB and Manipulations,<sup>33</sup> opens to the place. On hearing the call of the attractor, she stops. It is in the stopping that the place gives itself. She listens, she dwells, she abides, she weighs densities, measures speeds, modulates permeations, navigates the grain of textures. All the time, mapping, measuring, naming, finding sense, analysing elements of the place. These named, measured, weighed and mapped elements, as speeds, weights, densities and textures are commensurate in the dwelling-with, and found coresonant in her body, in its blood and breath, its rhythms and scales; a precise measuring, finding and imbibing of the place in her body. She dwells, she listens, she studies the place and her body consonant in the dwelling. Attuned to the atmosphere of the place.

And with time, abiding in the dwelling with sustained attunement, she finds the place in her body, as her body is in the place. The place leaves its footprints, its residues, in her flesh, vibrates her, making her something else. Someone she wasn't. She opens to and bears the place as surely and as tangibly as the forces colliding in and tensioning the earth's surface open to and bear her weight.<sup>34</sup>

In retrospect, it is clear that these observations and other field notes from the workshop describe an embodied performative methodology for capturing, measuring, and reporting on atmospheres in ways which more objective, discourse-based approaches would be incapable of achieving. Moreover, this performed methodology of attractors, elements, and atmospheres remains appropriate to the ontological dimensions of atmosphere as defined by Böhme and Schmitz. First, the use of the body as the means and

---

<sup>33</sup> A typical day at a Bodyweather workshop consists of three phases: 1) MB (Muscle-Bone) in which performers move in lines performing repetitive exercises aimed at coordination, stamina, balance, and the discovery of each body's characteristic energetic sphere; 2) Manipulations: two performers working together gently manipulate each others bodies into positions which they could not achieve on their own in order to open potentials and energy flows in bodies that would not habitually be available; 3) Groundwork: exercises aimed at discovering the intricacies of the place through close analysis and sustained dwelling. The whole day creates a profound change in habitual perception and bodily orientation to the world.

<sup>34</sup> Stuart Grant, "How to Stand in Australia," in *Unstable Ground: Performance and the Politics of Place*, ed. Gay McAuley (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007).

the measure situates the method in the moment of the living apprehension of atmosphere. The body is primary as the medium, the instrument, and the site of the performative mode of both enquiry and reporting. Second, the system of attractors, elements and atmospheres activates a living body in contact with and determined by an environment. Both Bodyweather and the aesthetics of atmospheres share a commitment to the priority of externality and immersion. It is necessary for a body to become, to dissolve into the place, to become indistinct, indiscernible as a feature of the atmosphere. Third, the aesthetics of atmospheres and Bodyweather deal in the same kind of knowledge. The non-mathematical, inexact yet not imprecise physics of both atmospheres and Bodyweather require the same class of concepts for their description and explication. Husserl presages Schmitz' insight into the "monopoly of mathematical and physical space,"<sup>35</sup> cited above, pointing out the "misleading prejudice" in the belief that the methods of the exact sciences of geometry and mathematics must serve as models for every new science.<sup>36</sup> The aesthetics of atmospheres as practised in Bodyweather is a science of

*morphological concepts* of vague configurational types directly seized on the basis of sensuous intuition and which, in their *vagueness*, become conceptually and terminologically fixed. The vagueness of such concepts, the circumstance that their spheres of application are fluid, does not make them defective; for in the spheres of knowledge where they are used they are absolutely indispensable, or in those spheres they are the only legitimate concepts ... which are *essentially, rather than accidentally, inexact and consequently* also non-mathematical.<sup>37</sup>

Perfect circles, absolute points, precise symbolic logics, and any form of pre-given schemata are of no use to the embodied, descriptive science of the aesthetics of atmospheres, whose understanding must be brought to proper expression through direct, concrete embodied experience. Atmospheres can only be analysed, rendered, and reported from within. Performance is an appropriate mode for this process. Bodies carry atmospheres. Performing bodies can capture and recreate them.

---

<sup>35</sup> Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, "Emotions Outside the Box," 255.

<sup>36</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1982). 169.

<sup>37</sup> Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 166.

The essentially vague and fluid nature of concrete atmospheric experience does not mean it cannot be raised in some manner to the general and typical, but their extension is the concrete, not the ideal, precise yet inexact. So what might be the inexact morphological essences by which the measure of atmosphere might be gauged? Openness, airiness, shadows and light, pathways, greyness, clutter, dankness, perfumes of familiarity, densities of dwelling, comfort, alienation, the strange, claustrophobia, the weight of walls, the promise or exclusion of doorways, rest, succour, vertigo. The fine gradations in the language and experience of atmosphere are infinite. Atmospheres are morphological essences. The question is, how, precisely, do morphological essences give us measure? We live them, we live from them. We measure with them by living them. By experiencing them. By drifting up into this open ceiling, by soaking up this brightness, recoiling from the vertigo, huddling into shadow, curling in the familiar, becoming engulfed in the long soft oblong, steeling against the storm. They are precisely apprehendable sensitivities, susceptibilities, exposures, vulnerabilities to weights, dimensions, velocities, and concentrations.

### **Senses of the City**

The final section of this article points towards the practical application of the aesthetics of atmospheres in a deeply qualitative methodology for the measure of the grounded experience of being in cities. The *Senses of the City* project is being staged in Melbourne, Australia, from 2013-2015. This multi-disciplinary social aesthetic investigation of the atmospheres of the city combines traditional qualitative research methods, phenomenological environmental experience groups, performative site-analysis, and oral/archival history to develop a multi-levelled account of the living experience of being in the city. Melbourne has undergone thirty years of urban planning and implementation. There has been a great deal of research conducted into the effects and results of this planning, but most of it is quantitative – concerning densities and flows of population. There has been little substantive research into the experience of Melbourne – what it feels like to be there. This project aims to reveal the common ground and mutual interaction between the physical form, social/cultural life, and human experience of the city.

The project will identify atmospheric, experiential zones, public and private, which work or do not work, which are vibrant, dangerous, diverse, active, dull, exciting, liveable, desolate, dispersed, or welcoming. It will establish their boundaries, where the mood changes, where the space syntax flows or is blocked, how the atmospheres are constituted. What are the tangible, physical elements that create attractive or repellent atmospheres?

What is the colour of welcome? The temperature of danger? The speed of vibrancy? How do the inhabitants experience the place? Why do people go to an area or why not? How might pathways and attractors be extended or established? What does it actually *feel* like to live in, work in and visit the city?

The method consists of three components conducted simultaneously in selected sites around the city:

- a) **Qualitative:** This component entails three linked, sequential phases, each plumbing an increasing depth of emotional/affective understanding.
  - i. Face-to-face on-site surveys with selected groups of users of the city. Aiming to establish terms for an affective/emotional experiential study of urban places. This is the beginning of building a vocabulary of affective first-person terms which people use to describe their experience of the place.
  - ii. Extended psycho-ethnographic interviews with selected representatives of the different groups – residents, tourists, shoppers, workers. To gain detail and precision in the understanding of what the respondents mean by the affective terms gathered in the previous phase, which they use to describe their experiences of living, visiting, and working in the various urban zones. Terms are interrogated and detailed to provide a more in-depth understanding of the embodied substance of the emotional experience.
  - iii. Phenomenological environmental experience groups. In this phase, selected individual participants conduct a sustained self-study of their living pathic experience of the city through diaries, which are discussed in face-to-face meetings and ongoing online discussions.

On its own, this component—particularly the environmental experience groups, even without the performative and archival work outlined below—will provide more in-depth data from the specifically emotional, affective life of the city than traditional qualitative/quantitative survey and interview.

- b) **Performative:** This is the most methodologically innovative and specifically appropriate moment in the task of measuring atmosphere. A group of Bodyweather performers, trained in the method of attractors, elements and atmospheres, and principles of space syntax,<sup>38</sup> will conduct

---

<sup>38</sup> Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

sustained inhabitations over a three-month period in the same sites as the qualitative work. The aim is to analyse the atmospheres of the sites and measure the physical elements of the places – intensities, densities, flows, speeds, weights, temperatures, light, porosity, permeability, barriers, borders. The material collected from the inhabitations will be used as the basis for experiential/affective multimedia mapping of the sites.

- c) **Historical/Social:** This component consists of an archival and oral historical study of the uses, development, and meanings of the selected sites. Researchers will detail the stories that permeate the places. How do social memories coexist with and shape present-day experiences of the place? How and where do the ghosts of the place manifest?

### Conclusion

Hasse asserts that the study of the experience of space has been dominated by a “rational attitude which ... suppresses all affective relations.”<sup>39</sup> This domination has caused “the omission of feelings and ... excludes a specific kind of sociability ... fundamental for the comprehension of social roles in social systems.”<sup>40</sup> He proposes to supersede this with a method that “follows the basic assumptions of a phenomenology whose scientific object is the result of reflections on pathic situations.”<sup>41</sup> In this aim, he recuperates a line within phenomenology from the 1930s-1970s, incorporating von Dürckheim, Minkowski, Straus, and zur Lippe. This line carries forward the Schmitz and Böhme’s radical questioning of the subject/object polarity. In this new phenomenology,

the distance between the ‘interior’ of a living individual and the ‘exterior’ situatedness of a given world could be seen as one ... the corporal individual was located ‘inside’ of a lived space in an existential and vital sense: there was no world of things on the one side, while a world of experience (of those things) was to be found on the other.<sup>42</sup>

Hasse also notes Minkowski’s complementing of the idea of lived space with lived time. This is of particular interest to the performative dimension of this current work. Performance, as a temporal art and mode of research, is able to directly live and render the time of the experience as well as the space. To

---

<sup>39</sup> Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment,” 52.

<sup>40</sup> Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment,” 53.

<sup>41</sup> Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment,” 53.

<sup>42</sup> Hasse, “Emotions in the Urban Environment,” 55.

approach the temporal aspect of atmosphere, Hasse turns to zur Lippe's concept of 'lingering', which he describes as a "a contemplation ... a perceptive impression that is produced without any stimulus ... the lingering attention is produced by a 'surrounding milieu' in a pathic inclination."<sup>43</sup> The system of elements, attractors, and atmospheres is a direct practical instantiation of all these principles.

This brief survey of Hasse gives a powerful argument in support of the necessity and compelling appropriateness of a performance research approach to the task of understanding the living experience of the city. The performative phase of this project—through extended, reflective inhabitations of the environments—explores relationships between the body in its engagement with the material artefacts of the environment and the immaterial emotional experience of atmosphere. The aim is to bridge the material and the immaterial. The tangible, physical constitution of the environment is brought together with the living, temporal, emotional experience.

Through the combination of the stories people tell, what they say about their experience, and the in-depth analyses they perform in the group phenomenological phase, the performative inhabitations which aim to reveal the material underpinnings of these experiences through dwelling in the environment, and the hermeneutic/cultural/historical interpretations which people bring into the environment, this method provides an embodied, multi-layered approach to experiencing and recording the pre-reflective constitution of the experience of atmosphere.

The method answers Hasse's call for a phenomenological approach. The inhabitation and the Bodyweather exercises place the everyday functional usage of the place into an *epoché* from which it is possible to examine the material and structural conditions that give the place as the experience it is. In the natural attitude of everyday life in the city, we do not reflect on the constitutive elements and processes that make our experience possible. As we move through the city, we are late for our meeting, on our way to the bank, shopping, eating our lunch in the mall. Even in the most leisurely of urban activities we are generally regulated by, and engaged in, flows of purpose and production. A missed or late train does not normally plunge us into a questioning of or exclusion from these flows, it heightens tensions, rearranges appointments and activities, necessitates different arrangements. In our apprehension of and immersion in the life of the city we are not disposed to take up a position outside the natural attitude of our inhabitation. This project instantiates modes of dwelling whose sole purpose is to examine the

---

<sup>43</sup> Hasse, "Emotions in the Urban Environment," 56.

constitutive structures that make possible the flows and patterns of the emotional/affective life of the city. This work proceeds as an embodied living phenomenological reduction which enables the insertion of the performers into the environment in the phenomenological attitude, which will enable the revelation of the fundamental structures of the living experience of being in the city.