

Eclipse Moon / Kinetic Atmospheres

Johannes Birringer



Fig. 1. *eclipsemoon*, acrylic on canvas, 2018. © Johannes Birringer

Introduction

Immersive theatre was yesterday. It had gained currency in recent times, then became overused as a mode aiming to involve audiences in unconventional ways, just like the masks in Punchdrunk's *Speak No More* or *The Masque of the Red Death*, theatre installations now considered forerunners of contemporary immersive performance in the Anglo-American world, where people flocked to abandoned buildings to wear the masks and be corralled around rooms and dark corridors, huddled together invited to interact or face an intimate moment with an actor, a complete stranger. Elsewhere, the craving for illusionary and virtual environments became less pronounced, as livelihoods turned precarious and living space less habitable, more disturbed. Place and plausibility illusions, in game or VR design, may tell us something about the quality of simulations of an experience, but not about the experience of reality. Our earth's climate changed. Now, in the spring of 2020, the world has changed even more, and yet is becoming more recognizable. Many say they have time now to listen

better, to notice Nature a little more intensely, to rediscover their environment that they had overlooked. I would have thought to notice the many intricate matters, processes and activities in nature, one must look very closely and carefully indeed.

But during and after the pandemic lockdown, social distancing began to be regulated, hygienic hierarchies to be established by government ordinances and local law enforcement. Museums closed and then slowly opened again, for example in Berlin in late May 2020. The state museums announced they had developed a “comprehensive catalogue of protective and hygiene measures” including limiting the number of visitors, ensuring 20 square metres per person to view the art, with visitors having to book online and be guided in a strict circular path around the exhibition for a maximum stay of two hours. Wearing facemasks is compulsory. Audio guides will no longer be for hire, while security guards will warn visitors not to get too close to the paintings and each other. At the MFA in Houston, the first museum to reopen in the US, visitors will have their temperatures taken upon arrival. Theatres, at the time of writing, are closed. The masks are back.

Immersion today is blindness. Positively, the approximation of a disability-focused model, which does not treat unimpaired visuality as the norm, allows for a multitude of perceptual variation and tactile, auditory and olfactory engagements. The tactile and olfactory are now under suspicion, but they will undoubtedly persist to be strong sensations that are viable, desirable, and often vital. This more sensorial approach I actually sought and explored over the past few years in my theatre work, and I think it can have value now, too, during and after the pandemic: when we return to presence again, when things need to open as living trouble, trouble that must breathe in all its “tentacular” ways, as Donna Haraway suggests in her latest book (2018: 47). Having to live together and having to die together. Atmosphere cannot be experienced in lockdown unless we see the isolation as a bitter irony of Sartre’s existentialist *No Exit*: a stage of utter confinement, and of the surreal. But we still have windows and can glimpse the real outside. In this outside, just as we breathe polluted air during smog, so we might breathe in the tiny aerosols we have heard so much about. Aerosols are the tiny floating pieces of pollution that make up smog, the dust particles one sees floating in a ray of sunshine and also the very small droplets of liquid that escape your mouth when one talks, coughs or breathes. Actors, singers, choirs, the brass section of orchestras are currently under suspicion as if they were harbingers of death. If aerosols are clumps of small liquid or solid particles floating in the air, it means they are everywhere in the environment and can be made of anything small enough to float, like smoke, water or virus-carrying saliva. They are part of our atmosphere, then.

Precisely during the lockdown, nature was expandingly there, ever-present, the outside to an internal lockdown that appeared as complete confinement within built architecture, rooms. When I ventured outside, I was breathing darkness, following scent, herbs, mosses, lumps, cracks in the soil. Pathways began to appear through the growing grass of the fields, in the valleys. I did not need to see, I could feel the paths in the dark. One could relearn forest growth, touch moss and tree bark and plants, hear river sound and birdsong, sense moistures at different times of the day. Textures and life lines. I shall refer to this as forest knowledge (cf. Tsing 2015).

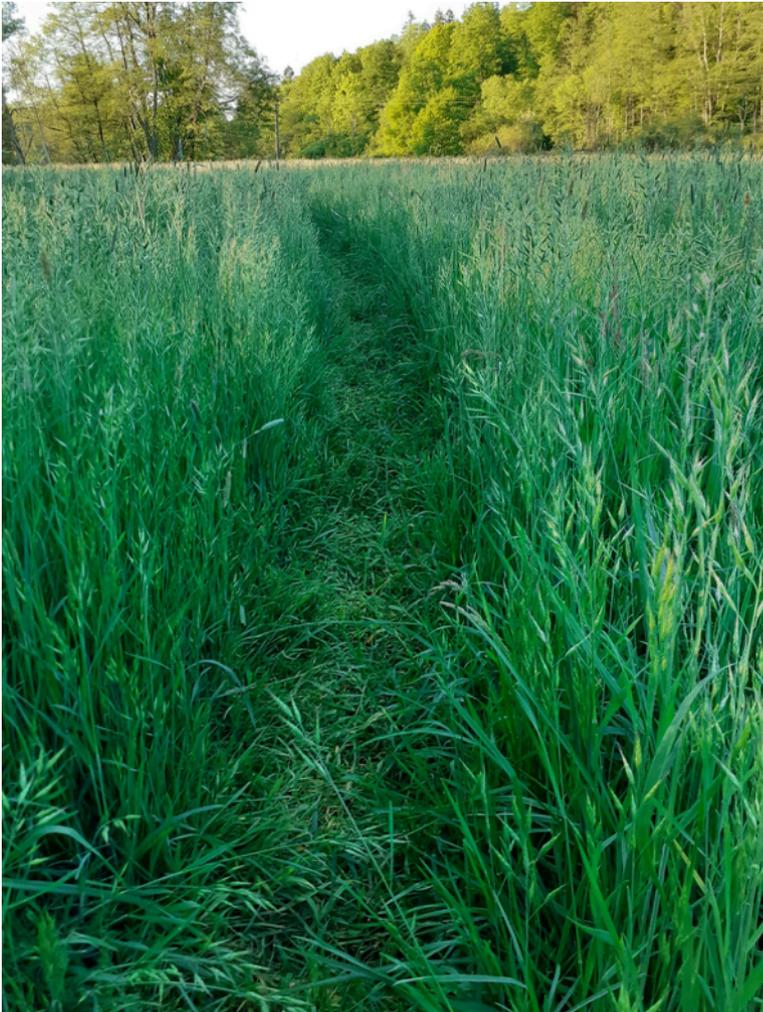


Fig. 2. Grass canyon. River valley in the Saarland. May 2020. © J. Birringer

I now sketch some constellations referring to creative research engaged with kinetic architectures for moving bodies in “augmented-reality,” avoiding the term immersion to an extent since it is also overused in the interaction design field. Augmented, affective environments have existed since ancient times when sacred dramatic festivals took place in amphitheatres, sanctuaries, temples (e.g. Javanese *Wayang kulit* shadow puppet plays were staged in village cemeteries). Theoretical

discourse on *atmospheres* is fairly recent, derived from philosophy (Sloterdijk, Böhme), cultural geography, legal and spatial studies, and architecture (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, McCormack, Pallasmaa, Zumthor, Thibaud). This notion of atmosphere, originally derived from perspectives of geography, physics and chemistry, now often relates to architecture/design, to questions of how designed space surrounding our bodies affects our emotions and moods. Speaking of augmented reality in theatre or music, we imply that the physically affective is amplified through technical means (sound diffusion, digital projections, lighting, etc). Thus an expanded sense of the choreographic is evoked, with various alchemical dimensions or corporeal and perceptual irruptions. Augmented space enters us and our receptors receive many (often ambiguous) clues. The fullness of the real returns in such densely sensorial atmospheres of performance rituals we long to rediscover – ritual participation is craved, the sublime, the erotic and rapturous desired. Rituals are contagious, we also know. Exploring such contagious material conditions, our DAP ensemble have become “builders.”

In one of our dance-theatre installations, *kimosphere no. 3* (2016), DAP-Lab created an environment that focussed on tactile vision, inviting vision-impaired and blind visitors to explore an installation where movement and costumes worn by the dancers were to be felt and apprehended through handling, and embodied listening.¹ All the wearables emitted sound, so that the costumes could be heard, and visitors could lean into the choreographic objects, re-orienting their attention to the ephemeral, that which can be handled, stroked, tapped and sensed through the skin. In late 2017, *kimosphere no. 5*, a smaller, more intimate version of the earlier architecture was presented as an augmented reality installation at Queen Mary Drama and Film Theatre, London, inviting visitors to listen to or touch the sonic and textural vibrations in the engineered kinetic atmosphere, this time including suspended trees, gauzes and paper (one of our dancers, Haein Song, used the floating *kime* technique familiar to her from Korean ritual *kut* performance), as well as a video poetry game and a VR experience station (where visitors could wear a head-mounted display and walk through a

¹ The first experiment by DAP-Lab with the immersive form was created in *UKIYO [Moveable Worlds]* (2009-2010) when I designed an open space criss-crossed by five *hanamichi* on which the dancers and musicians performed while the audience was free to walk around and across the space in whatever way they liked. Visitors often came very close, inches away from the dancers who wore specially designed audiophonic costumes (wearables) created by Michèle Danjoux, DAP-Lab’s fashion director. For a film excerpt, see: <https://youtu.be/g2yfYrlvOLM>. The later developments of our kinetic atmospheres began with the European METABODY project, initiated in Madrid (July 2013) by a collaborative network of arts organizations, research labs and performance companies, led by Jaime del Val (Asociación Transdisciplinar Reverso). In 2016 the DAP-Lab hosted the Metabody Forum in London and premiered its *kimosphere no. 3*; one performance was specially dedicated to visitors from the Ealing Association for the Blind. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DdAcv37jmc>.

simulated forest while real leaves and branches were part of their physical wayfaring). They could sense the leaves, branches and paper while imagining seeing a virtual subtropical forest in Madagascar, the red island.

Forest Knowledge

Kimosphere no. 5 was performed during a conference – Staging Atmospheres: Theatre and the Atmospheric Turn² – introduced by the organizers with an interesting proposition, namely that within the current interdisciplinary *atmospheric turn*, theatre has presented itself as an heuristic paradigm in which the social, material and political elements of atmosphere are thought to resonate, albeit in an idealised manner. Yet if the theatre had been adopted as a paradigm for “augmenting” or engineering atmospheres for a long time, why then, the organizers asked, does it present such an acute example of the “affective tonality” of aesthetic experience in today’s cultural obsession with audience participation (Thibaud 2011: 2014)? And why did Böhme’s “The Art of the Stage Set” – suggesting that atmospheres can be engineered rather than just being contingent like the weather or the diffuse mood sensed in natural or urban environments – become a key text concerning the production and reception of atmosphere?

It should not have been a surprise that scenography is engineering. The cultural obsession with audience participation, on the other hand, certainly deserves re-evaluation, as it may well be a false tonality driven by market imperatives and gadget interactivity branding. When I spoke to presenters at the conference, I mentioned that my company had been creating installations for years, without having heard of Böhme and an “atmospheric turn.” When did it turn? Scenography, in my understanding, has always implied a fundamental concern for environmental composition, for presences and projected presences, for architectural moods and affects, for machinic surprises that once were compared to magic or the acts of spirits. Baroque engineers like Athanasius Kircher invented all kinds of machines that worked their strange magic in the theatre and the world. In 1646 he published the book *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbra* and compiled the state of art about light, mirrors, lenses, astronomy as well as detailed illustrations about the *camera obscura* and the *laterna magica*. The devices he collected in his “Museo Kircherianum” have been described by media archaeologist Siegfried Zielinski as a museum full of “marvellous optical and acoustic devices that

² Staging Atmospheres: Theatre and the Atmospheric Turn, Queen Mary University of London, 8-9 December 2017, coordinated by Martin Welton and Penelope Woods, in collaboration with Ambiances (Réseau International).

would create illusions and delight to the visitors.” These artefacts were mostly automata figures with hydraulic or pneumatic power able to perform a series of automatic movements (Zielinski 2006: 125). This museum, then, is also an ancestor of what I call *kinetic atmospheres*.

And did not Kandinsky and Schlemmer, or the Russian constructivists and cosmists, take us deep into the technical/spiritual dimensions of architectural tonalities? Did not Eisenstein, from his drawings to the stage designs and films, explore the challenge how to reconcile elemental sensuality with forms of logic and artistic abstraction to produce “ex-stasis,” that nearly mystical foundation for aesthetic appearance? Did not Xenakis’s musical architectures project astonishing atmospheres, already diagrammed in the designs and spatial scores (*Raumpartituren*)³ of the composer’s polytopes and diatopes? Collaborating with architect Le Corbusier on the Philips Pavilion (1958 Brussels Worldfair), Xenakis used his work *Metastasis*, based on the designs and mathematical proportions given by Le Corbusier's Modulor, in order to compose the micro- and macrostructures. His sketch was in the form of a graphic notation looking more like a blueprint than a musical score, displaying graphs of mass motion and glissandi that float like structural beams of the piece, with pitch on one axis and time on the other. The overall structure and the control of elements, such as the massive glissandi, culminated in the idea of the hyperbolic paraboloids which were built into the pavilion. Xenakis’ finely detailed work on rhythm became crucial for the designing of the undulating panes of the façade. When I peruse the diagrams, I see and feel rhythms of fascia-like lines and cyanobacteria filaments reflecting the laminar structure of stromatolites, fossilized 2.5 billion years ago into sedimented rock. I can also imagine animated trilobites, with legs, limbs like antennae – appendages construing a lively exoskeleton. Less old, I remember seeing a 130-million-year-old fossil of a bird with featherlike traces, the creature etched into rock as if caught dancing. Paleomatter, like scores: physical evidence of the life activities and movements of now vanished organisms. Trace fossils, for example, include tracks, trails, burrows, feeding marks, and resting marks – an implied social choreography of an ancient creature that dragged its tail in mud.

³ The spectrogram for Xenakis’ *Metastasis* – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2O8bMIEijg> – is a fascinating visualization in its own way. The term *Raumpartitur* (German for “spatial score”) struck my attention during a workshop at Festspielhaus Hellerau in Dresden where we examined Adolphe Appia’s modernist ideas for “active light” and modular, processual scenography. Penelope Wehrli had staged her *camera orfeo* installation there in 2008 (CYNETart festival), calling it an *auto-choreographische Raumpartitur* (<https://vimeo.com/140767884>). See Wehrli 2010.

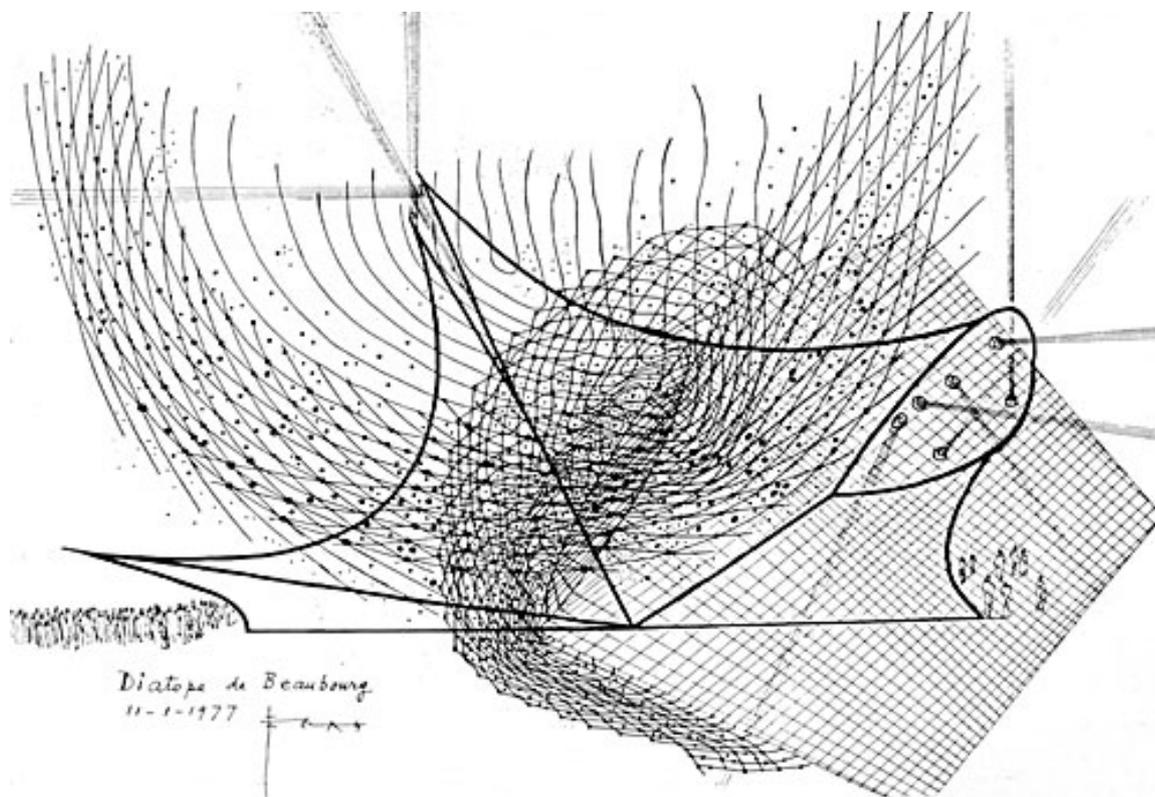


Fig. 3. Iannis Xenakis, diagram score for *Diatope de Beaubourg*, Paris 1977. *Diatope* with its curvaceous architectural construction was realized in 1978 outside the Centre Pompidou using Xenakis's electroacoustic piece *La Légende d'Eer* plus a computer generated light show involving some 1600 electronic flashes, 4 laser projectors and 400 pivoting mirrors and prisms.

So from my memory of “projections” of time gone, experienced in the Hall of Paleontology at Houston’s Museum of Natural Science, I can easily conjure up theatrical scenes of interaction, except this time between audience and trilobites or feathered fossils. I might imagine the museum’s earliest paleontological displays as footsteps, the traces of an evolving drama, with epic and tragic undertones. I walk back and forth along the lines of evolution, marvelling at the impressive silhouette of the Dimetrodon, with its large neural spine sail, whose kinetic mobility may have been limited by the fin. But the bones are very expressive, and “expensive,” the museum tells us, since the extra bone required calcium phosphate that needed to be found in the food intake. We could now also make an evolutionary association, between animal and human reactions to threat for example: identical to other furry animals, in situations where we experience fear, our hairs will stand up to make us appear larger.

Those sensations of fear or awe are familiar to us when we enter a deep cave, a tunnel, a cathedral, we sense the environs through our skin and bones. Returning to Xenakis, spatial performance, music

in particular, clearly generates affective tonalities and perceptual resonances that can link to metaphysical concepts such as the ecstatic, and the kinetically extravagant. Böhme suggests that *ecstatic materialities* adhere to properties of *things*, and vibrant matter emerges along with what actors do or designers fill the stage with (1995: 33). There are many examples – in the European context at least since Appia, Craig, and Piscator; in the Latin American context one thinks of Oiticica, Meireles and Neto; or of highly coded Eastern traditions with the extravagant costume, make up and movement of Noh, Kabuki, and Indonesian dance – of theatrical spaces filled with tensions, their intensity contours tuned with uncanny, unnerving or soothing affect, with compelling rhythms, timbres, shadows, and presences. Those rhythms are everywhere in the African traditions of music, dance, art and theatre, vividly experienceable, for example, in the Ghanaian Chale Wote festival or the Nigerian Yoruba festivals.⁴

Appia's staircases for Dalcroze's staging of *Orpheus and Eurydice* in the Hellerau Festspielhaus (1912) also spring to my mind, since Appia's concepts for "rhythmic spaces" and his radical ideas for environmental and indirect lighting (what he considered "creative light") were path-breaking for 20th century design in the west, influencing directors, choreographers and composers (from Bob Wilson to Kirsten Dehlholm, William Forsythe, Manos Tsangaris and Ragnar Kjartansson).⁵ The impact of scenography on new thinking in dance is also uncontroversial; we see striking dance environments or "choreographic objects" (as William Forsythe called his installations) when choreographers collaborate with visual artists. In Merce Cunningham's case, Bob Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns worked on the stage atmospheres; most memorable is perhaps the 1968 *RainForest* with Andy Warhol's "silver clouds," where dancers' movements seem to blow the helium-filled silver pillows to make them look like cloudlike wanderers searching for a home.⁶

⁴ Omófolábò S. Àjàyí, in her book *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture* (1998), offers a comprehensive study of the potency of Yoruba sacred and secular dance in its visual, oral, olfactory, tactile, proxemic and kinaesthetic multidimensionality. Olugbenga Olusola Elijah Taiwo's new book, *The Return Beat: Interfacing with our Interface* (2020), emphasizes the Orishas and animating forces, but also the African, Eastern and intersecting diasporic ancestral traditions as continually expanding, the curved polyrhythmic flux – the "return beat" – offering hope for all wanting to partake in a trans-cultural awareness of such metabolisms and kinaesthetic psychologies.

⁵ See Brandstetter and Wiens 2010, especially Birgit Wiens's chapter on rhythmic movement and "Kreatives Licht" (223-54). Appia's spatial experiments at Hellerau were conducted alongside Émile Jacques-Dalcroze's eurythmics; the ideas for "gestaltendes Licht" (creative light) were implemented by Russian designer Alexander von Salzmann. See also Beacham 1993: 53. When I started choreographing at Hellerau in 1994, the Festspielhaus was in ruins, after long neglect and occupation by the Soviet army since 1945. The building is now repaired and revitalized for the performing arts.

⁶ This is beautifully evoked in Alla Kovgan's documentary film, *Cunningham* (2019).



Fig. 4. Still from Alla Kovgan's *Cunningham*, 2019. Courtesy of Mongrel Media.

Sensorial Environments

Such environments actuated through sensorial embodiment and movement offer rich potential for a relational aesthetics and dramaturgy, as the performers (or visitors) – via touch or other mediating actions – can affect changes in the audio-visual sphere and also shape narratives or assemblages of media poetics. Such “wearing” of the space, so to speak, produces transformations in the behavior of palpable physical-computational environments. In the case of *kimosphere no. 3*, mentioned above, the interfacial garments designed by Michèle Danjoux were audiophonic, and due to their ability to act and impact change in such performance scenarios they were imbued with agency. Such a relational aesthetics also implies that the wearer (and wearability) is impacted by the material and surrounding physical/digital environment interwoven with choreography and somatechnics. The careful modulation of such interrelations with a reciprocating environment requires performer technique; it requires, at the least, a familiarity with the dimensions of real-time composition implied by interactive transductions, and a heightened awareness of the incarnations of (most likely) culturally specific wearable constructs.⁷ For visitors, the tacit agreements imply that they intuit what

⁷ During the past two years, Chinese dancer/choreographer Zhi Xu has collaborated with the DAP-Lab and performed in *kimosphere no. 5* and *Mourning for a dead moon*. In his own work, he has used culturally specific objects such as chopsticks and stilts in inter-action. See his “Choreography of Sonic Chopsticks and Intervention of Digital Technology with Dancing Bodies,” *Body, Space & Technology*, 19(1), 2020, 56–75. (<https://www.bstjournal.com/articles/10.16995/bst.331/>)

can be done or experienced, how they can explore the kinetic objects or performance situations. Installation art (e.g. Olaf Eliasson's experience design with poetic light environments, his most well known perhaps the inscrutable *The Weather Project*, 2003-04) probes a wide range of affective interfaces for users but only very rarely gives away intelligent garments or "controllers" (as they are called in music and games/VR technology) to be worn by participating audiences. In many cases, visitors are meant to watch, listen and, at most, "gesture" at the interface architecture. Such "immersive" spectacles tend to be seductive and often are commercially successful. During an exhibit on artificial intelligence, *AI: More than Human* (2019), at the Barbican Centre, London, I observed how visitors to teamLab's *What a Loving and Beautiful World* behaved – flapping their arms like wings or gesturing vividly with their hands when they felt that the motions of their extremities caused a small change to happen in the tapestry of digital projection: a change of color, a shadow, a flying object. This seemed to excite visitors, while ambient trance music tried to calm them down and lull them into a vapor. I sat there for ninety minutes, having felt bored almost immediately. In a review I somewhere read that it was "an endless immersive digital installation in which tumbling calligraphic characters transform into animated images when touched by a visitor's shadow. Flocks of birds, mountains, thunderclouds, cherry blossom, sparks of fire, trees and raindrops leap out from the shadow of your fingers, skitter across the wall and interact: it's enchanting and mesmerising." Not sure what shadowy fingers the critic applied, but it did not work with mine, no flocks of birds tumbled. This of course is also interesting, if indeed the wall responds differently each time. A similar interactive 3-D installation, *The Worlds of Splendors* (瑰丽.犹在境), produced by the International GLA Art Group, was recently staged in Beijing, and the images I have seen from visitors interacting with the walls are almost identical to the ones I witnessed in London.

There are other immersive environments, as we have seen them over the years in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, where audio or visual interfaces have been substituted by implicit motion and dislocalized sensation. This could be called a kind of unconscious wayfaring in a large-scale space, performance yet becoming a tactile and prismatic experience – and Eliasson's *Din blinde passager* is perhaps a good example of this inverted "wearing" of the space. During a 40 meter-long journey through dense fog, movement is intensely visceral, as one cannot really see anything but feels one's way forward. Along this extended corridor, the fog's color gently changes from white to yellow and

finally blue, discombobulating one's subjective perceptual experience even further. At the same time, such embeddedness can also be exhilarating, suspenseful, and magical.⁸

Forest Knowledge 2

I stood in the valley and felt the trees in the dark, it was late evening, perhaps 11pm, and we waited for the eclipse of the moon, trying to look up and listen up, as darkness spread all around us. There were no more lights; only sound of the wind could be heard rustling the leaves of the trees and bushes, tangled landscape of my native village in southwest Germany. Here I had grown up, and I remembered the natural seasons and the light or the darkness they bring.

Late summer, like early spring or the dead of winter, tells stories of smell and of the wind. How wind feels on the skin, how the nostrils take in the aroma of grass, mushrooms, nettles, berries, flowers and plants, elusive effects that surprise us, as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has argued, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* – her ethnography of matsutake foraging and fungal ecologies (Tsing 2015: 46). The seasons are evolutionary psychology, we grow and learn with them. Forest knowledge is also an awareness of dawn and mist, of light on the edge of dusk at points where day shifts to night, *entre chien et loup*. An awareness of species of trees, oak, pine, fir, cedar, cypress, grasses and moss, ants, rabbits, songbirds, and of rays that cut through branches or fall into clearings. What is waning light if not uncertainty. These rays are elusive, dynamic and of contrasting color, representing lines of reflected light: they are crossings of reflected rays, from various objects and environmental masses. The moon is also elusive, I cannot see the full sphere, only a dim hazy shimmer, distorted contouring that sometimes breaks through the grayness of night clouds. The contours are frayed, like Antoine d'Agata's photographs of his fractured moon-like skull. I wait for this eclipse.

⁸ The retrospective *Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life* was held at Tate Modern, London (11 July 2019 – 5 January 2020) and included such remarkable installations as *Your Blind Passenger*, *The Seeing Space*, and *Your Uncertain Shadow (Colour)*. See <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/olafur-eliasson>.



Fig. 5. Antoine d'Agata. *AITHO*. Inkjet print (2014)

Ein dunkles Schweigen lastet auf den Geistern, in ihrer Menschlichkeit beschädigt durch Imperative eines Spektakels, das Menschen und Dinge zu konsumierbaren Objekten herabwürdigt. Die Nacht ist ein Gegengift zur Ordnung und Ungezähmtheit die letzte Zuflucht vor umfassender Sinnesbetäubung, der geistigen Befindlichkeit einer Gesellschaft, die einen Pakt mit der Angst geschlossen hat und deren stillschweigendes Prinzip das Vergessen ist.

(d'Agata 2018: 5)

A dark silence weighs on the spirits, damaged in their humanity by imperatives of a spectacle that degrades people and things to consumable objects. The night is an antidote to order, and untamed impulsiveness the last refuge from comprehensive sensory anesthesia, the mental condition of a society that has made a pact with fear and whose tacit principle is forgetting. (my translation)

Tacit Principles and Liquid Light

From a holistic phenomenological and somatic perspective, visual dominance has always been reductive. Why pretend to see into the darkness of the skull or the earth or the vast universe. Why not activate the spatial imagination through mental imaginaries, lucid hallucinations (cf. d'Evie 2017)?

We cannot see, in any case, what is not legible; the distance again dissolves into the body blood pumping spurting within and without covering the body until the body becomes something else a form of pure liquid perhaps something untoward something caressed by itself something isolated and dropped in the forest or river for others to discover after half drowning half dead but still but barely alive....

We do not sense any object with our eye. We do not sense the object as such, Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, instigators of Rayonism in Russia, proposed at an exhibition in 1913. Rather we perceive a sum of rays proceeding from a source of light. And these are reflected from the object and enter our field of vision or touch our skin.

Our being alive to all divergent perceptions always involves incessant movement (cf. Ingold 2011: 121), oscillation, flight, withdrawal, departure – and sensory awareness, orientations and embodied sensitivity to outside vibrations and resonances that meet skin or pores, like sun rays, entering into our organism. Hair standing up making us appear larger. We fear. We breathe in, swallow and process the world we inhabit, what is all around, above and below. We intermingle and the intermingling concurrently makes things, substances, events, and mediums of events indistinguishable – tracking and scent and scent and tracking are bound up.

Tacit agreements seemed to rule how we behave in public spaces where we gather or where we enter to negotiate something, a transaction or otherwise, where and how we leave. Tacit agreements also rule the way an audience watches a play or concert, how they engage or become involved when invited to wander into the scene. Some like to participate, play, expose themselves. Others prefer not to.

What is *black light*? What is a *red island* inside a VR headset?

We give attention to the role of the virtual and of wearable VR headsets inside this scenography, asking ourselves whether their inclusion was a good idea in the last instalments of the kinetic atmosphere series (*metakimospheres*) starting in 2017. The listener/viewer under a goggle headset, a kind of modern medieval visor, could be a paradox. Or they may have figured different solutions to what we might basically regard as an isolating experience within the social-theatrical – and often ritual-communal – event. The isolating experience in question is the game at the computer screen, and the wearing of the VR-headset or the lighter cardboard 3D headsets (with inserted iPhone) provided for our installation audiences. At the same time, it was an expansive space that visitors were invited to wander around in during the large-scale audio-visual-tactile landscape initially called “Red Ghosts/Shadows of the Dawn/Hors-là” – the ghosts in question being the eight speakers of an 8-channel sound installation, set upon tall stands, creating a tactile aural territory. Then there are the shadowy apparition from Maupassant’s horror story (*The Horla*) and the little ghosts of the Malagasy lemurs, the moonlit acrobats, evoked by our narrative subtext about slow evolutionary history.[fig.6]

The sonic and tactile materials move these kinetic stories, disseminate them around the architecture of the whole, with voices, electronic sounds, echoes, processed natural sounds, distorted crackles and hisses, lights, mists, colors and moving textures. The 8-channel installation, with each speaker shrouded in a mosquito net suspended from the ceiling grid, in fact conjures a metaphorical or mythical forest of ghostly presences (three dancers, wearing masks, are hidden quietly inside this environment, still or barely moving), with dense layers of a sound-in-motion that is experienced by visitors while moving around the forest of speakers.

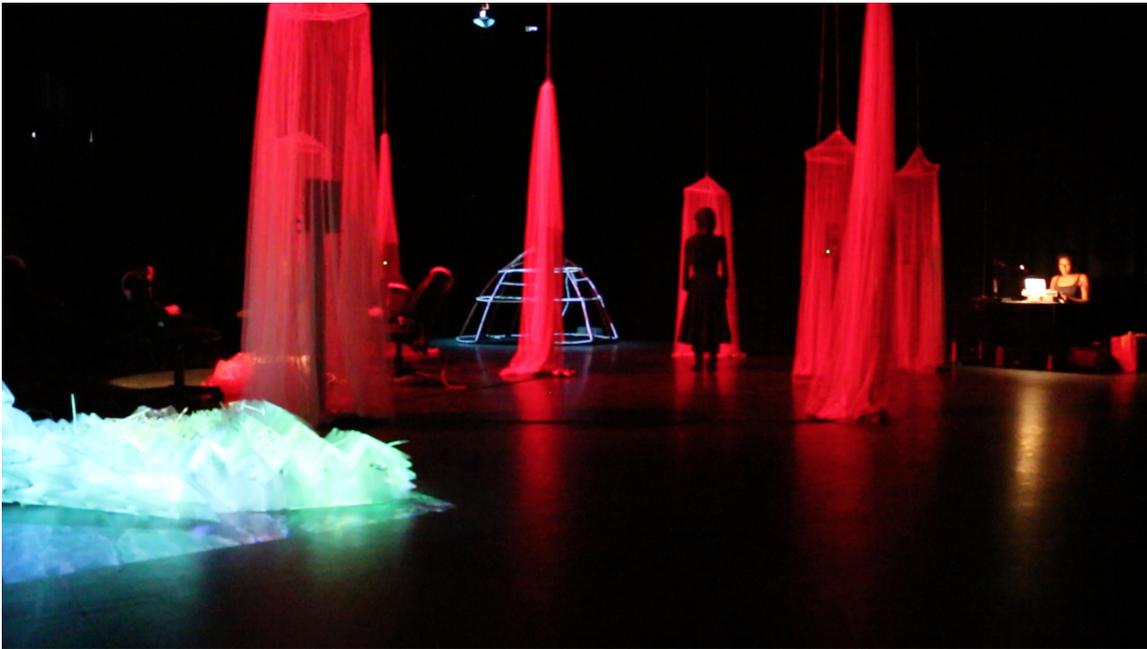


Fig. 6. Yoko Ishiguro, standing still in front of a ghost speakers; coral reef on the left, and sound artist Sara S. Belle performs in background right. Soundsphere skeleton visible in the back. *metakimosphere no.4/Hors-là*, 2017. London © DAP-Lab

And why do I feel so comfortable with my forest knowledge, moving in the dark night as if it were a theatre? I am on stage, and light – or its absence – is experience. I live and “see in the light” (Ingold 2011: 129). Rather, I see in the darkness – I move and sense infinite space imaginable, even if I cannot see. I attend to touching the sky, attune to feeling gravity and my being bathed in sound which is of course of the same universe of waves as light. I tumble, imagine grappled bodies, disorganized anatomies. The sound I hear: rustling wind, and crickets. Far away the barking of a dog.

Somatics and blackness

In the current context of global ethical and ecological crisis, tactile and haptic engagement and somatic practices become a growing field of sensorial, experiential and emancipatory learning, across fields and within a wide range of artistic, educational, and therapeutic contexts.⁸ Movement – the exploration of uncertain ground and of dynamic choreographic objects (into which and with which things and living matter move) – and somatic practices contribute to a re-education of the senses of attention and human interaction with a sustainable living world. Such movement exploration also teaches us about proximity and distance, tacit acknowledgement of what we might

⁸ In 2018, composer Richard Povall sent out a call for artworks and contributions to a project called “Evolving the Forest,” inviting creative thinkers and doers to explore physically and figuratively our relationship with wood, trees and forest over the past hundred years, and imagining that evolving relationship over the next 100 (<http://artdotearth.org/>).

mean or not know about “contact improvisation” (regarding cultural, gender and religious differences), the touch of skin and nontransparent intimacy, interaction with uncertainty.⁹

Light flows, and things and humans inhabit flow. Liquid light is mercurial and oscillates. As with the strange glow generated by black light raying on white surfaces, it produces fantasies of tactility and experiences of stickiness – the blue white glow is a ghost of white. Liquid blackness absorbs.

The night shadows all. It is mist hovering in twisted tangled branches, occluding vision, and in my painting the color black is not used, but the dark blues tend towards it, they affect the damp and darker sides, the withered underground and crevasses. Layers and layers of paint. The camera eye probes the musculoskeletal: everything visually falls apart, as the capture machinery attempts to make sense of discordant brush strokes. *Karagiozis* (Greek: Καραγκιόζης, Turkish; Karagöz), a Greek anthropologist friend reminds me, is a shadow puppet and fictional character of Greek folklore. In some folklore versions, the puppet also visits the moon. With one long arm, and the voice of the puppet, in here but not here.

Blüthenstaub

What then is the pollen? That which incarnates and seduces us, makes things liquid, smeared? In terms of painting, I realize I am only at the beginning. I learn to draw and mix colors, photograph the mix and point my camera at the crevasses. The acrylic paint becomes digital, it can now flow anew and be destabilized, synthesized, distorted and animated. The digital introjects life into the organism of old analog mechanisms or machinisms: paint drying slowly on the canvas.

The drying is like the weather. Transformative process. In the dark of theatre, we project color onto gauze, paper, silk, canvases. The materials transform and gain a somatic quality.

⁹ Body workshops and somatic practices sensitized me to a much greater awareness of the issue of touching, for example when I worked with female Muslim students and with dancers from different cultural backgrounds. Prarthana Purkayastha gave a research lecture at Brunel University in early 2015 during which she emphasized how some artists (her example was Hetain Patel) also explicitly hyper-orientalize their skin in performance in order to urge audiences to confront certain fixed racial and cultural assumptions, and to look at skin as a palimpsestic surface of complex lived experience. See her “The Annotation of Skin,” *Performance Research* 20:6 (2015), 114-121. I thank Prarthana, and my colleague Royona Mitra, for their critique of Western contact improv (after Steve Paxton) and its apparent disregard of cultural and caste differences.

The earth casts a curved shadow during a lunar eclipse, and the earth of course moves, revolving around the sun. We track ourselves (our time) when we note the changes of light during the course of a day, and the changes of shadows as well. How do we mobilize atmospheric attention to the world, to planets, to the wandering of light?



Fig. 7. Yoko Ishiguro in *Mourning for a dead moon*, created by DAP-Lab, Artaud Theatre, 2019. © DAP-Lab

“Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte und finden immer nur die Dinge”, writes the Romantic poet Novalis in 1798 (Novalis 2016: 3). One could translate it differently: we search everywhere for some metaphysical truth, for something *un-thinged*, ideal, but we only ever find matter, physical things. With things Novalis also associates plants. The idea of plants, seeds and spores seems to promise growth and life. In Novalis’ lyrical romantic interpretation of life, death is always present, from the beginning, the threshold of which is symbolised by the night. Life and death are developed into entwined concepts. Death is the romantic principle of life. In our most recent dance installation, *Mourning for a dead moon* (December 2019), we manifested the idea of the plants, spores, seeds and mushrooms in a variety of ways, both physically performed, digitally, as well as designed into the wearable CryptogamicCoat with which Zhi Xu dances the opening scene in complete darkness. Only partial LED shimmerings become visible from inside the coat when Zhi moves a certain way. In the following scene, the human face is eclipsed, and Macarena Ortúzar dances the dance of *acéphale*, her interpretation of Bataille’s idea that secretly or not, it is necessary to become different or else cease to be.

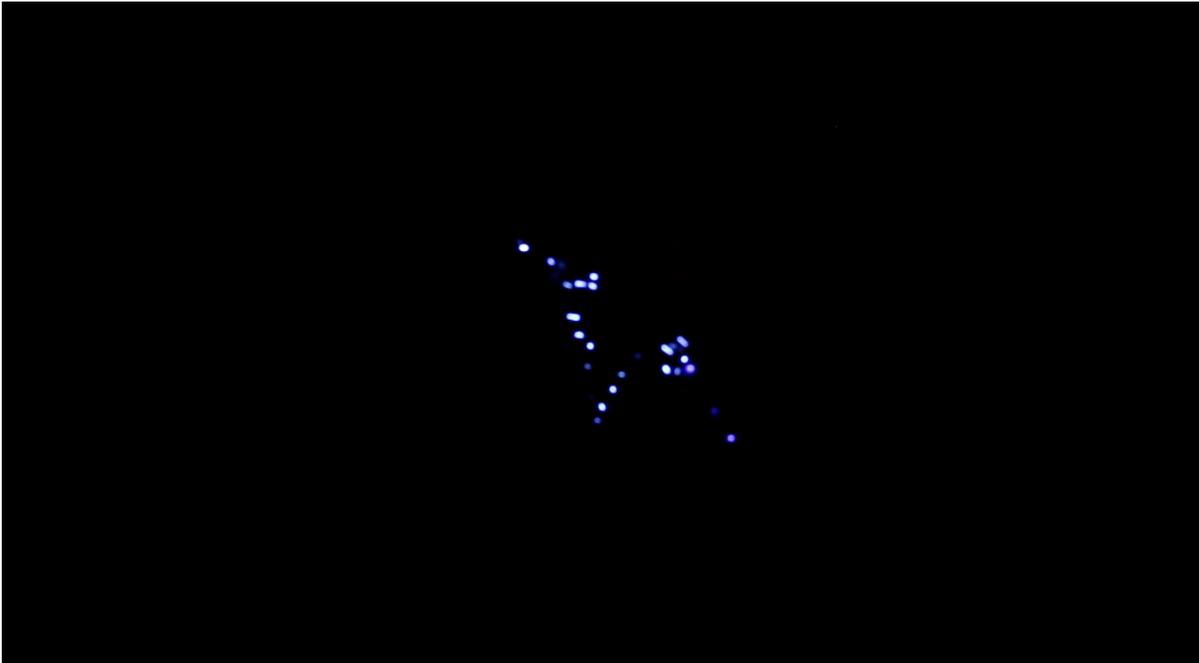


Fig. 8. Zhi Xu wearing CryptogamicCoat designed by Michèle Danjoux, *Mourning for a dead moon* 2019. © DAP-Lab

And yet, as the new wave of materialism and speculative realism reveals to us, matters have not only gained weight but also vibrancy and vitality, the unromantic lively “thing power” (Bennett 2010: 3) of material configurations and assemblages, ever re-thinged. At one point, Bennett speaks of confederations (2010: 23), her lovely conglomerates or piles of trash, of “plastic glove, oak pollen, rat, bottle cap, stick of wood” (2010: 4), and there are other echoes here of contemporary theories and aesthetics of interaction or intra-action. What concerns our kinetic dance installations as sensorial practices that I have described here, is not only the awareness of elemental materiality, but forest knowledge, once again, in all its somatic, cultural, ritual and cognitive dimensions – how to find your orientation in the thick underbrush, the groves, and dark pockets of fir and oak, or the denuded areas, flush with pine, eroded slopes and barer landscapes. Clearings. Images and sounds become precarious, in the era of disturbed assemblages, when erosion drains the colors of earth and of weather.



Fig. 9. Bare forest, early spring in the Saarland, 2018. © Klaus Behringer

If choreography means kinetic awareness of moving through and moving with, then how could a knowledge of orientation – lines of life that might be shaped, in analogy with the forest knowledge, by the cracks on the floor and the rhythms of tracking one’s way between earth and sky, listening to the wind – help to address the physical, spatial and material relations of assemblage?

Dancers, in the installations I have built, are asked to live in their atmosphere, and invite others (visitors) into the various spheres of the atmosphere, seducing them to touch the “images” (objects, fabrics, costumes, materials, light, gauze, sound, wearables) or, rather, the *elemental presences*, generating affective connections or a kind of perception of the atmosphere becoming (“becoming-atmosphere”), as if it were an affective ontology (Birringer 2018).

Kinetic atmospheres are both unpredictable/emergent and engineered. Assemblages are the structuring of interconnections, whether in a dance installation or aesthetic project or as reimagined industrial process or community organization and activism. In rethinking these relations one dreams of a strategy for social change and for critical awareness of climate change and the current ecological precarity. Atmosphere, like the experience of light, is air is weather – is invisible and visible, and it is experienced as manipulable to the extent also that we imagine we can protect ourselves from it.

The moon eclipse is shared as raptured continuum of this atmospheric. Rethinking our relations with assemblages provides a ground for social choreographies, new practices for living and being together.

Living together, I fear, would imply sensing the unseen, attuning to living and non-living process, creating sustainable and supportive networks for growth and diversified approaches to an ontology of energy. The question of energy also pertains to desires that are embodied and tacit interactions and partnerships with the world. This partnership is also with the dead, and Beckett here is our guide.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

(Silence)

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

(Silence)

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

(Beckett: 1988: 59)

Beckett's scene (which I titled "All the dead voices") is one of the atmospheres I have staged several times, both as dance-theatre and as a sonic installation tuned into sound within and outside bodies, thus the fleshy, moist, and granulated formulations of sound. Sound also in relation to materials, biological organisms, trees, the natural environment, ecological and geological. In a staging of *En attendant Godot* (2018) I created the sonorous landscape of the dead voices in darkness, mics picking up the murmur and rustling I had asked the audience to generate. I invited them to whisper, and distributed silver foil for them to rustle with. The audience is chorus to the conduction of the moon eclipse. I play a character (Pozzo) as conductor, jerked around by Lucky's pulling the rope, my film-painting of the eclipse projected behind Vladimir and Estragon who are roaming the forest with their swords.



Figs. 10-11. *En attendant Godot*, Johannes Birringer as Pozzo and Alia-Andreea Al-Shabibi as Vladimir. Artaud Center, London 2018 © DAP

Unbeholding

What cannot be seen in this scene is what is most important – a growing sense of the paradox of the *Unbedingte* (Novalis), the “un-thinged” (literally translated from the German), which is related to the sublime or perhaps to the fossilized dead matter in the undergrounds of the anthropocene, the underworlds of the ontological continuum. Light here trickles slowly, as if the darkness in front of the hidden moon troubles the rays from getting out of the covering, the shimmers are red, as if an echo of bleeding perfection, hurt and hurting.

Planets are bodies, like ours, but they are also far away, in the great vast hollowing of mass. This says nothing about the penumbra, and the uncanny shudder of the landscape of the dark, retouched, noiseless there, and shudder encoding shudder of hands and feet against wood, skin against metal, worlds stitching, anything back alive, and the machines shudder in the almost-dark, you can hear the near middle of the night, crows and crickets, one shudders in fright over pain and death imagined, all the dead voices, all the past eclipses, the shudder performs without the viral performative of language.

There is no side to the other, and with the other absent, here or there, the digital is the former painting, parallel to the parallel world beyond the moon or before the moon, shifting objects not as such, the unshifting of the world's traces leaving objects not as such, every world-line, life-line, stumbles going nowhere but the memory of form, every form's memorization conjures the semblance of an object, not un-thinged or not the trace of memory, nor the shadow which coalesces, as such that we give it the name of hardness or moonness and ontology, paint already flowing with coalescing shadows into memory, memory then also dissolved into traces shifting objects not as such,

the clarity of this lost in parallel worlds, so many shifts of movement or fluid behaviors and behaviours of shifts, landed in the fruition of parallel worlds, eclipsed and separable by distance or measure, always everything in the form of extrapolation.

Bibliography

Beacham, Richard C. (1993) *Adolphe Appia: Texts on Theatre*, London: Routledge.

Beckett, Samuel (1988) [1956]. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber.

Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Birringer, Johannes (2010) 'Moveable Worlds/Digital Scenographies', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 6 (1), 89-107.

Birringer, Johannes (2017) "Metakimospheres," in Susan Broadhurst and Sara Price, eds., *Digital Bodies: Creativity and Technology in the Arts and Humanities*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 27-48.

Birringer, Johannes (2018) "Becoming-atmosphere," *Performance Research* 23:4/23:5, 159-65.

Böhme, Gernot (2013). *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Brandstetter, Gabriele and Wiens, Birgit, eds. (2010) *Theater ohne Fluchtpunkt/Theatre without Vanishing Point*, Berlin: Alexander Verlag.

D'Agata, Antoine (2018) "AITHO," *Lettre International* 122, 5.

Danjoux, Michèle (2014) 'Choreography and Sounding Wearables', *Scene* 2(1-2): 197-220.

DAP-Lab (2017) *kimosphere no. 3*, dir. by Johannes Birringer and Michèle Danjoux, Artaud Center, London. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DdAcv37jmc>.

d'Evie, Fayen (2017) "Orienting through Blindness: Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods." *Performance Paradigm* 13, 42-72.

Eliasson, Olafur (2014) 'Atmospheres, Art, Architecture', in Christian Borch (ed) *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*, Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, pp. 90-107.

Haraway, Donna J. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Haraway, Donna J. (2018) *Unruhig bleiben: Die Verwandtschaft der Arten im Chthuluzän*, trans. Karin Harrasser, Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.

Ingold, Tim (2011) *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London:

Routledge.

McCormack, Derek (2018) *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Novalis [1798](2016) *Blüthenstaub*. Ed. Klaus Detjen, with a text by Hans Jürgen Balmes. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag.

Pallasmaa, Juhani (2014) 'Space, Place and Atmosphere: Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience', in Christian Borch (ed) *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*, Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, pp. 18-41.

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, Andreas (2015) *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*, London: Routledge.

Sloterdijk, Peter (2004) *Sphären III – Schäume*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004 [partial translation: Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton & Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009)].

Thibaud, Jean-Paul (2011) 'The Sensory Fabric of Urban Ambiances', *The Senses and Society* 6 (2): 203-15.

Tsing, Lowenhaupt Anna (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wehrli, Penelope (2010) *raum partituren. Ich wohne in der Möglichkeit*, Bern: Benteli Verlag.

Zielinsky, Siegfried (2006) *Deep Time of the Media: Towards an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Zumthor, Peter (2006) *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments – Surrounding Objects*, Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag.

Author Biography

Johannes Birringer is a choreographer and media artist; he co-directs the DAP-Lab at Brunel University where he is Professor of Performance Technologies in the School of Arts. He has created numerous dance-theatre works, video installations and digital projects in collaboration with artists in Europe, the Americas, China, and Japan. DAP-Lab's interactive dance *Suna no Onna* was featured at festivals in London (2007-08); the mixed-reality installation *UKIYO* went on European tour in 2010. The dance opera *for the time being* was shown at Sadler's Wells, 2014. A series of immersive dance installations, *metakimospheres*, began touring in Europe in 2015-19 as part of the Europe-wide METABODY project. DAP-Lab's last dance production, *Mourning for a dead moon*, premiered in December 2019. He authored *Media and Performance* (1998), *Performance on the Edge* (2000), *Performance, Science and Technology* (2009), and transdisciplinary research projects, including the books *Dance and Cognition* (2005), *Dance and Choreomania* (2011) and *Things that Dance* (2019). His new book is titled *Kinetic Atmospheres: Performance and Immersion* (Routledge).