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Atmospheres – Architectural Spaces between Critical Reading and Immersive Presence

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Postmodern and post-structuralist theories in architecture have entered a phase of revision and re-evaluation. Taking the current academic debate of 'critical' theory versus 'post-critical' or 'projective' practice as a starting point, this essay analyses three examples of atmospheric spaces to test the alternative modes of interpretation and to question the clear oppositional dialectic developed by the protagonists. Especially the common denominator of weather and atmosphere in the projects of Diller Scofidio, Philippe Rahm, and Olafur Eliasson, might be able to introduce uncertainty, ambiguity and suspicion against the rendering of clear alternatives to the discourse. Whilst the arguments of the post-criticality debate are primarily based on a linguistic model of architecture, the indeterminacy of *atmospheric spaces* opens up different readings, with the brief remarks about the philosophers Gernot Böhme and Peter Sloterdijk being just a first step. Instead of giving answers, this essay asks for a reformulation of 'critical' thinking in architecture beyond the current atmospheric interferences.

Within the contemporary discourse on architectural theory there is a phase of reorientation: the definition of architecture (and especially theory of architecture) as a 'critical practice' – the similarity to the notion of 'critical theory' of Frankfurt School philosophy is not by accident – is challenged by a 'post-critical' or 'projective' understanding of the discipline, characterised by the development of scenarios, design of user interfaces and production of multiple lifestyles. The main issue of this debate is the relationship between architecture and society, or, to be more precise, between architecture and power, capital, media: On one hand there is a concept of architecture being a 'critical' device, reflecting on the power and gender discourse, economy and globalisation, participation and resistance, law, politics and representation. On the other hand there is an arrangement with the driving forces of society (the architect as 'surfer' on the wave of capitalism) and a focused concern about pragmatic questions of acquisition, concept, design, realisation and cultivation of architectural urban environments.

'Criticality' as the default mode of reflection, interpretation and evaluation of architecture was established in the US after 1968, under the impression of Continental European philosophic, linguistic and Neo-Marxist writings. Soon these theories turned into 'canonical' readings, rhetoric strategies and an established academic discipline, although they were originally meant to question the very idea of historisation, disciplinarity and elite culture. 'Post-Criticality' stems from the same Anglo-American academic background and exploits the transatlantic cultural transfer, but this time operating with the *work* of European architects as evidence: especially the projects and buildings of the Swiss Herzog & de Meuron, the London-based Foreign Office Architects (FOA) as well as the Dutch Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) of Rem Koolhaas, which are used to proliferate the idea of a 'projective practice' beyond the resistance and negation of critical inquiry. Post-critical theorists attack the 'regime of Criticality' as a set of established concepts, strategies, texts and key-works, which they suspect to limit and pre-determine the discourse on architecture on a linguistic basis. Instead, they try to stage an open, multiple and liberal understanding of the discipline by introducing alternative reading strategies.

After pop and media culture and 'new pragmatism'[1] had challenged the institution of 'criticality' in architecture in a first round, the second attack came with the essay 'Notes around the Doppler Effect' by Bob Somol and Sarah Whiting,[2] in which they differentiate between a '*critical project* linked to the indexical, dialectic, hot representation and a *projective practice* linked to the diagrammatic, atmospheric, cool performance'.[3] This critique of critique by Somol & Whiting was broadened and intensified by other U.S. theoreticians of the same generation, like Sylvia Lavin, Stan Allan or Michael Speaks, but there is more at stake than an academic

[1]   So called 'Pragmatism Conference' at the MoMA, N.Y.C., November 10th – 11th 2000, with the full title: 'Things in the making: Contemporary Architecture and the Pragmatist Imagination', organised by Terence Riley and Joan Ockman.

[2]   Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism', *Perspecta 33. The Yale Architectural Journal*, (2002): 72-77.

[3]   *autonomy versus pragmatics*: disciplinarity as autonomy and process (critique, representation, signification) versus disciplinarity as instrumentality (projection, performativity, pragmatics), force and effect; *resistance versus engagement*: resistance and critical commentary versus engagement as experts in design: operating with qualities of sensibility (effect, ambience, atmosphere) in addition to the work with object qualities (form, proportion, materiality, composition); single articulation (program, technology, form) versus possibility of multitude and emergence; *hot versus cool*: hot representation, high definition, distinction versus cool media, low definition (atmospheric interaction of viewer); *performance versus representation*: alternative realities, scenarios, expanded realism (as if) versus narrative, belabored representation of the 'real'.

generational conflict or the call for a new style: this debate is addressing the relationship of architects and society, meaning not only clients, the housing market or the users of buildings, but the question of architecture as a cultural practice with political and social implications. The term 'projective' provokes an emphasis on design as architectural expertise (projective as in *project*, that is plan or scheme) and the aspect of engaging and staging alternative scenarios (pro-jective as 'looking forward' or 'throwing something ahead'). The main argument of the 'projective' is formulated in opposition to a linguistic (over) determined architecture, legitimised by instruments of political correctness and institutionalised critique,that insists on a status as autonomous formal object or negative comment. Instead, Somol & Whiting point out that strategies of engagement with mass culture, capitalist society and globalised economy can serve as powerful sources to generate liberating scenarios and alternative lifestyles, and they confirm their argument with constant reference to pop and media theory and the work of OMA/Rem Koolhaas. Another, maybe unintentional notion of the 'projective' derives from psychoanalysis and refers to the projection (imaging technique) of internal wishes onto external objects or persons. In this regard it is consequent for Somol & Whiting to align the 'projective' with the psychological, perceptional and sensual qualities of architectural space experienced by the observer, an agenda they share with Sylvia Lavin's 'architecture of the mood'.

However, the distinction of architectural concepts and practices between 'critical' and 'post-critical' architecture is not as clear as the dialectic argumentation of Somol & Whiting implicates. Firstly, there are undeniable differences within the combined front of the critics of 'criticality', as George Baird has clearly observed and demonstrated.[4] Secondly, there is not a single exemplary 'post-critical' building to exemplify 'projective' concepts, qualities, and the change of spatial perception, not a single 'projective' design to illustrate performance in architecture and the change in social interaction and effect.[5] And thirdly, *what* kind of qualities anyway? – So far, the contributions to the post-critical debate can be described as either radical abstract, a kind of meta-discourse on the epistemological paradigm shift following the 'end of critique' or 'the end of theory'. Or, the protagonists of the 'projective practice' eluded successfully from describing nameable architectonic characteristics – maybe to sustain a pluralistic credo of 'just do it' and 'everything goes', or maybe to avoid the commitment and petrification to a 'projective style'. Interestingly enough, 'post-critical' theory following the scheme of post-modernism, post-structuralism and other 'post-isms': defines its project *ex negativo*, as a critique of an established practice, without staging a clear alternative at first.

[4] George Baird, 'Criticality and Its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine 21*, (2004): 16-21.

[5] At the Stylos Conference 'Projective Landscape' at TU Delft, March 16th – 17th 2006, that intended to cover the debate on 'projective' and 'critical' design, there were just few architectural examples discussed as potential candidates for 'projective' architecture: F.O.A 'Yokohama Terminal', O.M.A. 'Seattle Library', Herzog & de Meuron, 'Prada Aoyama Epicenter, Tokyo'; today I would add the Gazprom City competition in St. Petersburg.

So far 'post-criticality' has been discussed primarily in U.S. academic
circles and magazines, but there are signs of an exhaustion of theory
in Europe as well. So called 'critical' theory has been diluted by
methodological popularisation and turned into a kind of critical gesture
or reflex, instead of opening new perspectives on momentary conditions
and challenging the status quo with alternative concepts. Within critical
discourse there has been a race for 'new' theories within the last 30 years
that lead to the impression of arbitrariness and fashion. In addition,
everybody has noticed that revolt and critique are part of the game of
(late) capitalism: critical gestures are soon internalised, commodified and
recycled as a consumer product; (Fig. 1), or critique is marginalised and
corrupted by its own protagonists – critical strategies have proven their
inefficiency in several ways.

Fig.1. *Starbucks revolution series*, marketing campaign. Image: *Frankfurter
Allgemeine Zeitung am Sonntag*, 13.11.2005; Frankfurt: 2005, p. 63.

As an example of the dilution between 'critical' and 'post-critical' practices
and as a testing ground for the transfer of the 'projective' argument in
European discourse, we might look at the *Blur Building* in Yverdon, by
Diller & Scofidio for the Swiss Expo 2002; (Fig.2). The newspapers and
visitors of the Swiss national event favored this pavilion above all other
exhibition buildings and named it the 'wonder cloud', though there was
nothing to see, except a hint of a steel structure in dense fog.The rest of
the programme was rather negligible: a water bar and a media project
that was reduced from an interactive media-scape to a straight-forward
sound environment, because of the exit of the telecommunication sponsor
a few months before opening. Still everybody was fond of the 'beauty'
of this 'habitable medium', as Liz Diller had phrased the concept, and
journalists were astonished about the new Swissness: 'No use, just fun.'
Though abstract, the cloud, hovering above the lake – high-tech product of

the water of the lake – was immediately perceived as a poetic happening. Backed up with the success of the pavilion after the opening, Liz Diller said in an interview with the national newspaper: 'Our architecture is about special effects [...] Fog is inducing some sort of Victorian anxiety about something that one cannot define.'[6]; (Fig. 3). The immersive effect of being surrounded by dense fog, to walk alone or in groups in a cloud – a dreamlike or surreal situation – with just the noise of the nozzles, has something of the dramatic visionary of Victorian fantastic novels, indeed. Earlier, during the design process the architects pushed the idea of constructed naturalness and the mode of individual perception even more:

> The project goal is to produce a 'technological sublime', parallel to the 'natural sublime' experienced in the scaleless and unpredictable mass of fog. This notion of sublimity, however, is based on making palpable the ineffable and scaleless space and time of global communications.[7]

6   Elizabeth Diller, interview with Gerhard Mack, *NZZ am Sonntag*, special edition to EXPO 02, 05.05.2002.

7   Ricardo Scofidio, 'Presentation Sunrise Headquarters, March 2000', in Diller + Scofidio, *Blur: The Making of Nothing* (New York: Harry N. Abrams 2002), p. 162.Abrams 2002), p. 162.

Fig. 2. Diller & Scofidio, *Blur Building*, area view, Yverdon, Expo02, courtesy of the architects. Photo: Beat Widmer.

Fig. 3. Diller & Scofidio, Blur Building, inside, Yverdon, Expo02, courtesy of the architects. Photo: Beat Widmer.

This is a reference to the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who discussed the sublime as the second aesthetic category next to beauty in his *Critique of Judgment*.[8] For him, the observer receives eerie aesthetic pleasure from perceiving the limitation of his power in front of nature. Kant continues to explain, that the delight in confronting a superior force can be transferred into abstract imagination as well. Diller & Scofidio applied both notions of the sublime and proposed a simultaneous effect of manipulated climate (nature) and abstract media presentation (imagination). Since the theme of this national park was 'I and the universe' the architects reflected on the dialectic between the individualised experience of the observer (*I*) and the environmental scale of their atmospheric installation in the landscape, and by addressing the topic of 'weather', its relationship to the whole of society and culture (*Universe*):

> Blur is smart weather. Within the fog mass, man-made fog and actual weather combine to produce a hybrid microclimate. [...] Weather is at center of a technological debate. Our cultural anxiety about weather can be attributed to its unpredictability. As a primary expression of nature, the unpredictability of weather points out the limitations of technological culture. [...] At the same time, global warming are proof that weather and climate are not impervious to human intervention. When we speak about the weather, it's assumed that more meaningful forms of social interaction are being avoided. But is not the weather, in fact, a potent topic of cultural exchange – a bond that cuts through social distinction and economic class, that supercedes geopolitical borders? [...] In truth, contemporary culture is addicted to weather information.[9]

There is a rhetorical ambition to charge the topic of weather – in common terms connected to small talk – with additional meaning, and stage the *Blur Pavilion* as an example of direct sensual experience and at the same time a product of mediatisation and representation. If we analyse the effect of this building on visitors and apply the matrix of 'projective practice', established by Somol & Whiting, we are able to identify the following features of the *Blur*:

- performance
- special effect
- ambiance and mood
- immersion and synaesthesia
- it requires engagement and participation of the observer, therefore a low definition media (McLuhan: cool)
- it is diagrammatic (in the sense of Deleuze: imposing a form of conduct on a particular multiplicity)
- it stages alternative scenarios and the virtual (what is more surreal than walking in a cloud?)

8   Immanuel Kant: *Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) from the original: *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790).

9   Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio, 2nd Presentation Sunrise Headquarters, June 2000, in: Diller + Scofidio: *Blur*, p. 182.

- architecture as design expertise engaging with other disciplines: media and IT, irrigation technology, civil engineering, government officials, sponsoring by corporate capital, landscape architecture and environment, etc.

So, we might think, 'check on all boxes', and therefore proceed to conclude: the cloud is a paradigmatic example of projective architecture? – Well, not quite, because the architects designed the *Blur Pavilion* as an act of architectural resistance and critique. The *Blur* was meant to 'question' the idea of national exhibition and spectacle and to 'problematise' the superiority of visual representation.[10] A critical gesture takes an object of consumerist mass culture and turns it upside down. This shift of perspective is thought to break with conventions and display mechanisms of the everyday, which then become perceptible and intelligible – and finally changeable. If exposition pavilions are manifestations of 'spectacle' and 'progress', the anti-pavilion makes use of these expectations in order to frustrate them. Further instruments of the 'critical' include the display of suppressed topics in society, the intentional displacement and misuse of elements, or the revelation of the construction behind the production of effects, like the theater of Bertold Brecht. In comparison with a common exposition pavilion, the *Blur Building* stands out as an anti-object, since it has no 'skin', no façade, no ground or roof; it has no definite form, nor size, if the steel structure is read as mere sub-construction of the cloud. Above all, it does not exhibit anything, except atmospheric experience itself.[11] Within a critical discourse, 'vision' is connected to unbalanced power relationships, constructions of identity and 'truth', in the same way as 'representation' or 'display' is labeled with exploitation, manipulation and consumerist commodification; therefore they qualify as primary targets of critical practice.[12]

There is a similar attitude towards media and technology: For *Blur*, Diller & Scofidio have used computers fed with weather scenarios of the site and informed with data about actual weather conditions, in order to calculate the pressure and distribution of water and the correcting of the artificial fog. The nozzles came from irrigation and cooling technology (though a similar technique was used by Fjiko Nakaya for the Osaka World's Fair of 1970), whilst the steel frame employed 'tensegrity' structures developed by Buckminster Fuller, and the bridges were made of fiberglass. In addition there was the 'braincoat' – an unrealised media concept of wireless communication devices integrated into waterproof clothing that should have kept track of visitors and matched their digital personal profiles. This embracing application of material and construction techniques, information and communication technology, is on one hand strictly operational – to stage artificial weather, to keep control of the density of the fog or to optimise the steel construction as carrier of the visitor

[10]   Ibid., p. 162.

[11]   Ibid., p. 195.

[12]   See: *Scanning. The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003), exhibition catalogue.

13   Elizabeth Diller, 'Blur/Babble' in:
Cynthia C. Davidson (ed.), (*Anything*,
Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 132-139.

14   For the term 'formless' in critical
discourse see: Yves-Alain Bois
and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless.
A User Guide* (New York: Zone,
1997) (French original: *L'informe:
mode d'emploi*, Paris: 1996).

platform and nozzles: this is the 'special effect' part of technology.[13] On the other hand the architects address the problematic aspects of modern technology, the dehumanising, restrictive features and side effects of control, optimisation, instrumentalisation and reification of people and things – not by avoiding, excluding or hiding them, but by an experimental implementation of high-tech devices in a deviant way of pose or game; (Fig. 4). Originally Diller & Scofidio were asked to provide a media concept for the Yverdon site, but during the competition they focused on a 'messageless message'. Hence the cloud does not stand for phantasm, performance or event, but for silence, emptiness and absence. Following this argumentation, the *Blur* must be read as 'critical architecture', because it demonstrates the characteristics of:

- autonomy: featureless, meaningless, objectless, formless[14] (or hyper-form)
- resistance against 'spectacle', the pavilion as 'display at display'
- critique of mediatisation and visual consumerism
- problematisation of technical evolution and futurism
- references to external critical discourses: representation: history of expositions; environment: climate and weather; media theory; technological based power, etc.
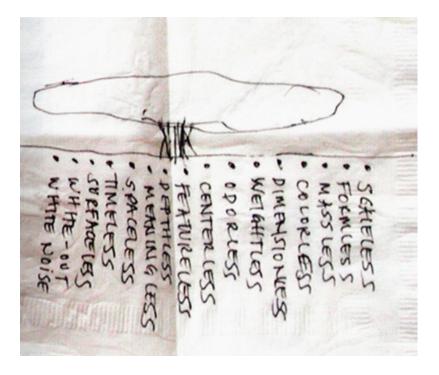

Fig. 4. *Blur Building*, early sketch, courtesy of the architects. Image: Diller & Scofidio, 1998.

One reason for blurring the boundaries between critical and post-critical features of the *Blur* might have to do with a different point of view: a projective interpretation relies on performance and effect on the observer (reception), whilst a critical reading puts emphasis on intention and content as defined by the author or critic (reflection). But in the case of a national event like the EXPO 02 experience is constructed by mass media. The spectators knew what to expect, because their experience of the *Blur* was immediately conditioned by special editions of newspapers, TV, and the marketing campaign of the Expo; (Fig. 5). On the other hand there might be some doubts about the 'critical' content of *Blur* as well: There is the general question of the critical potential of immersive atmospheres, events and icons, – is an image, even a *blurred* one, able to be critical? In addition, the critical content of the *Blur* shows the same traces of predetermination, this time not by mass media, but by the architect-authors themselves: Diller & Scofidio have used the channels of institutionalised critique (magazines, lectures and reviews) to distribute their authorised 'reading' of the work.[15] A number of articles that enforce a critical interpretation of the *Blur Building* show a significant degree of coherence. Diller & Scofidio define themselves as conceptual architects and regard theory and critical content to be essential parts of their design product.

Fig. 5. Diller & Scofidio, *Blur Building*, night view, 1998, with courtesy of the architect. Photo: Beat Widmer.

However, the self-regulating academic criticality might not be aware of features that have not yet been introduced to critical discourse, i.e. topics beyond ideology and representation, gender, colonialism, minorities, reification, commodification, etc. To give a short example, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has contributed an interpretation of the *Blur Pavilion* as a 'macro-atmospheric installation' and as an 'immersive climatic sculpture', which might be still within the range of options set

15   Not to forget the 'documentary' book to the building, see: Diller + Scofidio: *Blur*.

by the architects. But he went on to read the atmospheric and climatic qualities not as an aesthetic metaphor, but as initial experiments of 'air-design'. He identified 'air' as a relevant product of a future market society and predicted the end of communal atmosphere. For him, the design and commodification of 'air' follows from the history of privatisation of public services, common space, water, ground, etc.[16] Within modernity he distinguishes the dialectical opposition between an individual cell in the atomised 'foam society' and the macro interiors as social collectors and urban space multitudes, such as the stadium, the congress center or the exhibition hall, where individuals transgress to groups and masses. The architecture of the self – Sloterdijk thinks of the ego-cell as externalised immune system, therefore as prosthesis – has integrated more and more common goods and functions, to enable an autonomous existence within the conglomerate society of the foam.[17] And finally, it is not that far from universalised air conditioning of interior spaces to a complete autarkic 'air-design'.

For another example not discussed by Sloterdijk, but addressing similar issues of technologically controlled climate as the *Blur*, and therefore another possible testing ground of 'projective' theory on European ground, I suggest to look at the *Jardin d'Hybert*, the 'winter house' in Vendée, France, by Philippe Rahm; (Fig. 6). This project takes into account the generalised climatisation of contemporary spaces, and proposes an architectural approach to this condition. In the past, the question of air conditioning has been a technological one, solved by engineers; nowadays it has become a political one, revolving around sustainable development, energy standards and ecology and climatic change. The project, a country house for a writer close to the French Atlantic coast, does not work within the common standards of assuring a habitable environment for humans, or of creating comfort and cosiness, but stages the technical devices of climatisation. The machines for heating, ventilation and humidification are exposed, the whole building is arranged around a closed palm herbarium with artificial light; (Fig. 7). The house enables the inhabitant to live in a different climatic zone, in a different season, within a different time zone – for example Tahiti – regardless of outside weather conditions. The special quality of the climatic house, from the outside a black box, must be experienced from inside. Its main feature is invisible, but not insensible: the artificial atmosphere triggers direct effects on the human melatonin production, and therefore on the health and mood of the inhabitants. If we apply the matrix of 'projective practice' suggested by Somol & Whiting, there is:

[16] Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III*, 'Chapter 2: Indoors. C Foam City' (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 669-670.
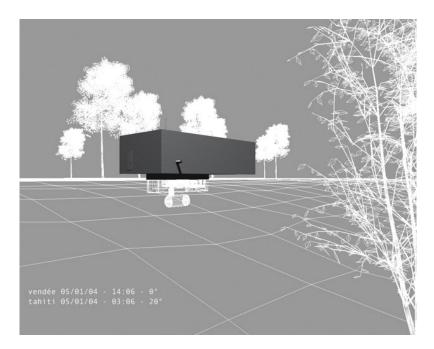
[17] Ibid., p. 534.

Fig. 6. *Jardin d'Hybert*, winter house in Vendée, France, perspective; courtesy of Décosterd & Rahm, Paris/Lausanne, and Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre George Pompidou, Paris). Image: Philippe Rahm, 2002.
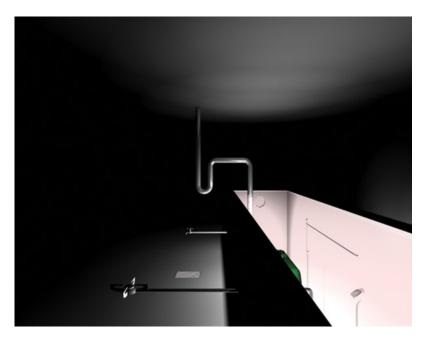

Fig. 7. Jardin d'Hybert, winter house in Vendée, France, inside; courtesy of Décosterd & Rahm, Paris/Lausanne, and Collection Musée national d'art Moderne, Centre George Pompidou, Paris. Image: Philippe Rahm, 2002.

- performance
- special effect
- ambiance and mood
- immersion and atmosphere
- it requires engagement and participation of the observer, therefore a low definition media (McLuhan: cool)
- it is diagrammatic (in the sense of Deleuze: imposing a form of conduct on a particular multiplicity)
- it stages alternative scenarios and the virtual (what is more surreal than living in Tahiti, but located on the French Atlantic Coast?)
- architecture as design expertise engaging with other disciplines: engineering; air conditioning; gardening; psychology; environment, etc.

In addition, the architect thinks of himself as decisively post-critical, or better non-critical: he is not interested in a theoretically informed design practice employing the critique of globalisation, simulation or the lament about the loss of individual and specific characteristics, put forward by authors like Jean Baudrillard or Marc Augé.[18] This attitude towards architecture can be described as 'applied projectivety', because he is working on extending the possibilities of architectural design into the fields of infrastructure, technology or the invisible qualities of space. With his projects he is testing the thresholds of the architectural discipline and engages with scientific methods and technological imports, which might be typical of the generation of 1990s, if we think of other architects like FOA, MVRDV or Jürgen Meyer H.

But on the other hand, against the rhetoric of pragmatism and experimentation, there is a distinctive critical aspect to the works of Philippe Rahm. This object, though set into a touristy landscape, remains closed, dark and anonymous, and frustrates common expectations of a country house. The unseen and soft factors of architecture are explored, framed and displayed. His architecture tries to uncover the space conditioning technologies, instead of integrating them into the construction or conceal them behind architectural surfaces and interfaces; (Fig. 8). His architectural projects problematise the subconscious mechanisms of climate control; they unveil the artificial constant climate continuum spread out from apartments, to lobbies, offices, cars, trains, airports and shopping malls, atriums and congress centers, which encloses us almost everywhere. They can be read as a comment on the de-localised, de-territorialised and de-temporalised way of life of the jet-set, who have made artificiality into a program or cult. At the same time, this excess of technical devices reflects on the issue of minimum-energy building

[18] Interview with the author on January, 20th 2006; Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: Introduction à une Anthropologie de la Surmodernité* (Paris:La librairie du XXe siècle, 1992); Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London, New York: Verso, 1995).

regulations – or the dependency of Western culture on fossil energy sources, as you like. With the interpretation of Sloterdijk in mind, the projects of Philippe Rahm can be read as a laboratory of the individual, as experiments with the ego-cell, or as a new stage of the externalisation of the human immune system, closing the inhabitant into a herbarium, but enabling independence from environmental factors like light, temperature, humidity, time and space. But even without the display of the manipulative aspects of building technology, one could feel inspired to articulate connections of the concept to the Western myth of the noble savage (Tahiti!), and the exit fantasies from modern civilisation, – with the help of state of the art technology.[19] A short roundup of the critical features of *Jardin d'Hybert* lead to this conclusion:

- autonomy: container architecture, form as absent discourse, independent from environment outside and touristy view
- resistance: against ecological regulations as well as globalisation
- critique of mediatisation and visual representation
- problematisation of technological climate control and 'soft' effects of spaces
- references to external critical discourses: environment: climate and weather; globalisation; tourism; psychological and physiological manipulation; technological based power; cultural history: the 'noble savage', utopia, etc.

[19]   This is not the space to discuss the influence of utopian projects of the 1960s and 1970s and the idea of a technological based exit from history, but there are obvious references in contemporary architectural practice to the atmospheric and pneumatic projects of Reyner Banham, Cedric Price, Archigram, Haus Rucker & Co., Superstudio, Archizoom, etc.; see for example: *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations 1956-76*, (Munich: Prestel, 2005).

Fig. 8. *Jardin d'Hybert*, winter house in Vendée, France, herbarium; courtesy of Décosterd & Rahm, Paris/Lausanne, and Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre George Pompidou, Paris. Image: Philippe Rahm, 2002.

Compared with each other, both examples of atmospheric architecture show the problematic relationship of critical and projective discourses: The resolute 'critical practice' of Diller & Scofidio was able to deliver a 'projective' object, if not to say an icon, with obvious potential for commodification, whereas the non-critical approach of Philippe Rahm turned out to produce concepts and projects, that enable a critical commentary on ideology and society. The theoretically informed process of scanning, slowing down and 'blurring'[20] of a mass spectacle produced an immersive event, whereas the straightforward instrumentalisation of technology and engagement with scientific research on hormonal effects of light and climate, questions architecture's role of providing human habitats.

With constant reference to indeterminate elements of atmosphere and weather, and as a detour to contemporary installation art, I suggest a look at a piece by Olafur Eliasson as a third and last example: *The Weather Project* at the turbine hall of the Tate Modern, London, 2003. Eliasson used the enormous room of the former turbine hall, reconstructed by Herzog & de Meuron, to create a lasting sunset: He covered one end of the hall with mono-frequency lamps emitting bright orange light, arranged in a semi-circular form that became a virtually complete full circle by reflecting off the mirror ceiling; (Fig. 9). The dimensions of the hall, now virtually enlarged by the double height of the reflected image, were made palpable by artificial mist that wafted inside and dispersed the orange light. The turbine hall, which is open free to the public, turned into a space for non-museum activities ranging from transcendental perception to talking or having lunch. People met, sat or lied down on the floor, sometimes people organised themselves in ornamental group patterns that were reflected from the mirrored ceiling. If we apply the projective matrix again, though being aware, that the installation is neither an object nor architecture, we get:

- performance
- special effect
- ambiance and mood
- immersion and atmosphere
- it requires engagement and participation of the observer, therefore a low definition media (McLuhan: cool)
- it is diagrammatic (in the sense of Deleuze: imposing a form of conduct on a particular multiplicity)
- it stages alternative scenarios and the virtual (what is more surreal than exhibiting real elements of a fake landscape in an art gallery?)
- concept art as design expertise engaging with other disciplines: architecture; landscape; air conditioning; environment, etc.

20   K. Michael Hays, 'Scanners' in *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 2003), p. 129-136 (exhibition catalogue).

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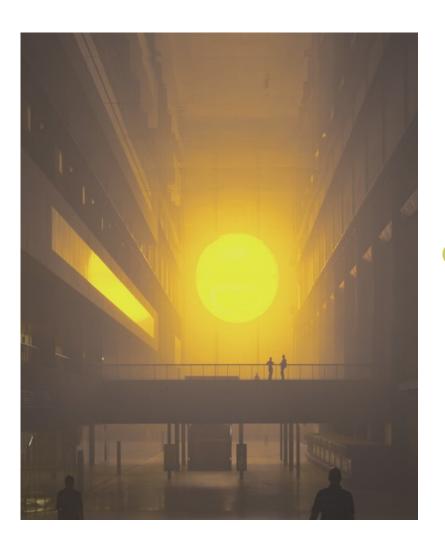Critical Reading and Immersive Presence

Fig. 9. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, Tate Modern London, 2003-2004;
courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

However, this is just half the story: when Olafur Eliasson talks about the
weather, he is interested in the fundamental aspect of life, because he
reads culture as a process that produces body-friendly environments.
This notion of physicalness, haptics and presence leads to the German
philosopher Gernot Böhme, who refers with the term 'atmosphere' to the
'emergence of things', and who assumes interdependence between the
physical perception of an emanating presence (object) and the realisation
of the physical presence of the observing self (subject).[21] With the help of
phenomenological and communicative theory, aesthetics might transcend
the fixation with artwork and the question of the rational judgment of taste
(Kant), in order to develop an integral perception of physical presence that
is always embedded in a continuous exchange of energies and signals with
the surrounding environment – that's what he calls atmosphere.
For Böhme, the experience of synesthetic, immersive environments does
not exclude a reflective and critical stance, on the contrary, the self-

21 Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays
    zur Neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt/
    Main: Suhrkamp, 1995).

consciousness of physical presence and the awareness of the relativity of
human apperception are the foundations of intelligence, of maturity and
of an aesthetic access to reality – opening the emancipating effect of art.
In addition to this epistemological and ontological reflection Eliasson
questions the construction and mediation of human apperception: For
him, weather is not only addressing physical presence, but is a cipher
for time, including the future. Weather in urban societies, he says, is a
mediation of indeterminacy, the unforeseeable, the dialectic of duration
and constant movement. The term 'mediation' describes the degree of
representation that interferes with the experience of a situation – which
can be language, cultural codes, media, or social, moral and ethical
ideologies. Eliasson is well aware, that experience is mediated *per se*, but
he wants to problematise the subconscious mediation (by others). In his
works he questions and frames the construction of accustomed ways of
experiencing by inflecting the view of the observer back on perception:
'seeing yourself seeing'.[22] *The Weather Project* disclosed its imaginary
machinery, (Fig. 10) and was meant to unmask the artificial aesthetic
environment as a constructed experience. Though Eliasson's critical
inquiry does not halt at his own work, his installations aim at the frame of
the museum as an 'institution', not by repeating formal avant-garde moves,
but by taking responsibility of media reports, public relations, marketing
and the museum education of the Tate Modern. Eliasson believes in the
utopian aspect of artwork: 'museums are radical', because they enable
alternative frames and constructions of life, providing evidence, that
'reality' is just one out of many possible world models, and therefore
functioning as the 'immune system' of society.[23] But critical strategies have
to be light, flexible, temporal, for the context of here and now, in order to
avoid the inefficiency of petrified critical gestures: an art beyond objects.[24]
And last but not least: staging the topic 'weather' had less to do with neo-
romanticism, than with sociological considerations, since 'everybody
talks about the weather.' To close the argument of the critical aspects in
Eliasson's work:

- autonomy: from disciplinarity of art, exhibiting art, perceiving art
- resistance: against representation and mediated experience
- critique of representation and normalised thinking
- problematisation of institutions, commodification and marketing
- references to external critical discourses: architecture; media;
  environment: climate and weather; globalisation; natural science;
  technologically based power; sociology and utopia, etc.

[22] The title of another work by Olafur
Eliasson, mirroring the view of the
observing visitor back on himself, 2001,
exhibited in the MoMA, New York, etc.

[23] Olafur Eliasson, 'Behind the scenes.
A roundtable discussion' in: Susan
May (ed.), *Olafur Eliasson: The
Weather Project*, (London: Tate
Publishing, 2003), p. 65-95.

[24] Olafur Eliasson, 'Museums are radical',
in Susan May (ed.), *Olafur Eliasson:
The Weather Project* (London: Tate
Publishing, 2003), p. 129-138.

Fig. 10. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, Tate Modern London, 2003-2004;
courtesy of the artist. Photo; Jens Ziehe.

Though these examples are not strictly interdependent, the issue of
weather and climate seemed to offer possibilities for staging experimental
concepts in art and architecture. These atmospheric-immersive spaces
elude the oversimplified categorisation of 'critical' or 'projective' practice,
because they combine performance with reflection, engagement with
resistance. At the same time they are able to transgress the alternative
modes of delivering an autonomous formal object or producing a
documentary display of socio-political or ethical problems, frictions
and discourses. And this is maybe part of the answer to the post-critical
debate and its transfer to the European architectural landscape: the
'post-critical' – or 'projective' – theory might not gain the same impact
and disturbance in Central European discourse, since the dependence
of art and architecture on criticality has not been as dominant as in the
US. Nonetheless, 'critical architecture' has shifted from a mindset to
a style or methodology, and criticality has been stereotyped to gesture

and reflex. Criticality has lost its critical effect and therefore it is time to criticise critique and question theoretic production. On the other side, if architecture wants to be more than a services provider for design and planning, and art more than decoration, it relies on conceptual thinking, on experiments and on discourse. Critique – as the debate about these concepts and perceptive modes – is necessary to identify relevant topics and to provide criteria to produce, analyse, understand, evaluate – and therefore improve – architectural ideas. Critique is the mode to focus on the cultural surplus of architecture beyond mere 'production', to relate architecture to other cultural practices and society itself. Therefore it is necessary to understand, accept and apply the constant shift of the relationship architecture-critique-society. Critique needs to be revised to regain its ephemeral and agile status of reflecting on its own basis, concepts and constructions.

Maybe, the irreconcilable juxtaposition of 'criticality' and 'projective' is to no avail, maybe it has to be understood as a dialectic relationship. Maybe the projective is a critical device to reform criticality. Maybe the projective is just criticality's 'other'? – If we have a look at the history of 'critical theory' as formulated by Frankfurt School philosophy, critical thinking was developed to liberate critique from history and description, and to activate its potential for contemporary questions. 'Critical theory' was meant to engage with reality and to analyse society in order to initiate change and project alternative scenarios. In other words: the 'projective' has once been part of the 'critical', and it has to become part of its future.