

## Next to Nothing: The Arts of Air

[Steven Connor](#)

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Gertrude Stein wrote in her essay 'Pictures' of 1935 that in a painting there should be 'no air...no feeling of air' (Stein 1998, 227). The importance of air as a differentiating valve between art and life has recently been explicated by Lisa Siraganian (2003). Ruskin disagreed, on the grounds that 'everything that needful, nourishing and delightful about the earth comes from its capacity to take up oxygen - to rust: 'It is not a fault in the iron, but a virtue, to be so fond of getting rusted, for in that condition it fulfils its [161-2] most important functions in the universe, and most kindly duties to mankind. Nay, in a certain sense, and almost a literal one, we may say that iron rusted is Living; but when pure or polished, Dead' (Ruskin 1878, 161-2) Ruskin preferred an art that responded to the qualities or colour and texture imparted by this mingling of earth and air, for this reproduced the rusty variegations of Nature's own primary pigmentations:

All those beautiful violet veinings and variegations of the marbles of Sicily and Spain, the glowing orange and amber colours of those at Siena, the deep russet of the Rosso antico, and the blood-colour of all the precious jaspers that enrich the temples of Italy; and, finally, all the lovely transitions of tint in the pebbles of Scotland and the Rhine, which form, though not the most precious, by far the most interesting portion of our modern jewellers' work; - all these are painted by Nature with this one material only, variously proportioned and applied - the oxide of iron that stains your Tunbridge springs. (Ruskin 1878, 171)

Air has indeed been more and more in evidence in modern art and architecture. We can perhaps distinguish two forms of air-art, two modes in which the air has been pressed into artistic appearing. Let me call them 'absolute air' and 'object air'.

### **Be Absolute For Air**

Air has a privileged relation to the struggle of art with, or rather its striving to find ways of doing without, objects. More and more, and most conspicuously in art of the conceptual tradition, art must refuse to be reduced to or mistaken for the objects which it has traditionally been called upon to call into being. For over a century art has struggled against the idolatry or enchantment of objects, preferring processes, especially

processes of vanishing, decomposition or evaporation to the precipitation of forms. Air has often been the carrier of this immaterialism. Perhaps the inaugurating work in this tradition is Marcel Duchamp's *Air de Paris* of 1919. This is a glass phial which Duchamp made for his friend Walter Arensberg, buying it from a chemist's shop, and having the chemist pour away the liquid it had originally contained. In this work, both the container and the air it contains is a ready-made. The gesture of emptying out the original contents of the flask substitutes nothingness for the original commodity on sale in the pharmacist's shop, a lesson insisted on in the parody of consumer choice offered by the designation 'Paris Air', as though its place of origin gave it a particular value or distinctiveness, like eau de cologne or a Cornish pasty. So perhaps the air is not so much a ready-made as a ready-to-hand emblem of unmaking. Because what the flask contains is absolutely arbitrary (Duchamp described it as an 'Ampoule contenant 50 cc d'air de Paris' in a postcard of 1937, but the flask holds about twice this volume) the air here brings forward the idea of not being there and, by extension, art's capacity to summon and sustain this condition of the not-all-there, the next-to-nothing.

So no object embodies art's desire to have done with objects more than air. In fact, air has become a kind of allegory of art, or of its allergy to objects. 'Immaterial sensibility is a gas', Nicolas Bourriaud has written (Bourriaud 2000, 43). To work with air is to wish to become it, to evaporate every particle of what would betray art into the condition of an object, while yet remaining exquisitely, infinitesimally intact in that very operation. If air is, as Robert Boyle puts it, 'next Degree to nothing' (Boyle 1692, 201), then art aspires to insinuate itself into that differentiating chink. For the ability, not only to work with air, but also to identify with it, gives warrant to the claim that, if art can even be nothing then it can be anything. Art, like air, consists of nothing in particular, it has, and need have, no consistency with itself or anything else. Of course, this is also the thing that secures the distinctiveness of art. Everything else is stuck with the miserable finitude of having to be something in particular. Nothing, or nothing but art, nothing but the particular kind of nothing that art wants to be able to be, can be just anything.

Air is neither on the side of the subject nor of the object. It has neither objecthood nor essence. It has no objecthood because it has no single form of being, manifesting itself in a multitude, and never less than a multitude, of traces and effects - the hiss of a tyre, the breath of a zephyr, the buffet of a gale, the vortex of leaves on a street-corner. But these appearances are not the secondary expression of an essence any more than they are the properties of an object. The air is impression without presence. If we follow Irigaray (1999), the air is something like indetermination as such.

Not that there could be an *as such* of air, which, poor *perdu*, has no such thing as an *an sich* to call its own. The air has, so to say, no inside - it is all outerness, appearance, expiration, aperture, apartness from itself. That is why the idea of getting on the inside of air seems so comically oxymoronic; the notion sucks in supplementary prepositions, letting us say, more intelligibly, that we go *out into* or *up into* it. When you are in the air, you are surrounded by it, as you would be surrounded by a room or a house. But you are not yet, nor ever will be, on the inside of air. In the air, you are only ever out. Hence the strangeness of the mood or rumour that we say is 'in the air', or the conjuror's assistant who vanishes 'into thin air'. This may even help account for the fact that the mixed nature of air took so long to be discovered. Though some had suspected that the air must contain within it some vital principle, some inside or essence that was not identical with the whole of the air as such, the idea that the air could have a secret core seemed to many too strenuously mystical to proceed upon.

Air is not only poor in essence, it is also actively in diffusion. Its being is flight, flight from itself, the rushing out of essence into exteriority. This too is part of the point of *Air de Paris*. Were it not for the flask that contains it, the air would naturally diffuse, escape and mingle with its exterior. Even the idea of 'Paris air' is only an imaginary container. As art has sought to expand infinitely the range of its applications and operations, it has also sought to assume what might be called the illocative pull of the air away from the particularity of this or that place, its wish to propagate into everything. Much air art can trace its lineage to the 'Dimensionist Manifesto' published in Paris in 1936, in the form of a single-page insert to the magazine *Revue N + 1* by the Hungarian poet Károly Sirato and signed by Arp, Delaunay, Duchamp, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, Picabia, Kandinsky and others. This manifesto aimed to extend art into all the available dimensions of space, in the interests of 'Cosmic Art Vaporisation of Sculpture', and the requirement that '[R]igid matter is abolished and replaced by gazed materials.' The most unpleasant associations of the idea of vaporisation were as yet still in the future in the mid-30s, and the imperial cast of the demand that '[I]nstead of looking at objects of art, the person becomes the center and the subject of creation' was perhaps less irresistibly evident than it may now appear (Caws 2001, 538). Nevertheless, for much of the twentieth century, the apparent relinquishment of being involved in an art of air has also been able to be an exercise in actual or imaginary conquest.

In much recent art, air has become the marker, not of the difference between art and life, but of the aspiration of art to trespass beyond its assigned precincts, to approach and merge into the condition of 'life'. One of the most influential postwar proponents of this idea was Yves Klein, fourth dan judo expert, Knight of the Rosicrucian Order of St. Sebastian,

showman and occasional painter. From an early age, Klein had longed to join himself to the universal vacancy imaged in the overarching, cloudless, blue sky, even resenting the flight of birds for vandalising the sky's immaculate emptiness. The governing principle of his mysticism was the yen for expansion and dissolution, in an effort to dissolve all differences and distinctions in an immense cosmic unity. Realising that it was not possible for this condition to be simply or noncontradictorily given in art (or, if he had come to think of it, anywhere else for that matter), Klein saw it as his duty as an artist to find images that could both materialise the immaterial and 'impregnate' the viewer with a sensitivity to what lay beyond the bad dream of differentiated material existence and the constricting deixis of this here and that there, sensitivity being defined by Klein as '*what exists beyond our being and yet always belongs to us*' (quoted Restany 1982, 8). Initially, Klein saw single colours, and the particularly pulsating shade of ultramarine blue he dubbed International Klein Blue, or I.K.B., as the best way of activating 'zones of immaterial pictorial sensitivity' (Restany 1982, 54). But he realised within a couple of years (one wonders how it could have taken longer than a couple of minutes) that the transparency of empty air would be an even better aperture on to the Void. 'The Void' was in fact the title of an empty studio Klein put on display in Paris from April 28th to May 5th 1958. Though The Void was universal, it was fortunately not homogenous, since this enabled Klein, like an estate agent of inspired canniness, to exchange zones of immaterial pictorial sensitivity for specified weights of gold leaf.

After his meeting with architect Walter Ruhnau around 1957, Klein entered his 'pneumatic period', which was consolidated over the next two years with a series of projects for and fantasies of a global 'architecture of air' (Klein 1974, 45). In a pair of talks at the Sorbonne in June 1959, jointly entitled 'L'evolution de l'art vers l'immatériel', Klein set out his plans for all existing solid architecture to be dismantled and stored underground and for the climatic conditioning of all regions of the earth, which would allow human beings to live in a state of Edenic, if somewhat breezy repose, reclining on sofas consisting of jets of compressed air. The house itself 'must be built with the new material of "air" blown into walls, dividers, roof, furniture' (Klein 2000b, 91). The most important thing about Klein's architectural programme was the stripping away of the roof. Architects like Ruhnau had been hindered, wrote Klein 'by the last obstacle that even a Mies van der Rohe hadn't been able to overcome: the roof, the screen that separates us from the sky, from the blue sky' (Klein 1974, 45). In Klein's visionary pneumatic architecture, the office of the roof would be performed by a layer of compressed air that would deflect dust and rainfall. Nothing, of course, is said about the source of the energy needed to power this pneumatic Nirvana, or its possible effects on the terrestrial atmosphere (Restany 1982, 74-5. But then, there never seems to be any shortage of the thing that

mystical vitalists of Klein's persuasion call 'energy'. Like Irigaray, he seems convinced that '[n]o element is as light, as free, and as much in the "fundamental" mode of a permanent, available "there is" ' (Irigaray 1999, 8). Klein's idea was to create a state of planetary pneumatic bliss, which would conduct human beings to a stage of universal levitation. As he promised in a speech in Düsseldorf, 'we will become aerial men, we will experience the force of attraction upward, toward space, toward nowhere and everywhere at the same time; the force of earthly attraction thus mastered, we will literally levitate in total physical and spiritual freedom' (quoted, Restany 1982, 76).

This is not the last time that architecture as traditionally conceived will be denounced as the antagonist of air. Luce Irigaray condemns the architectural impulse she finds throughout the history of philosophy, which she sees as an antagonism towards the air, which is envisaged as a feminine exteriority hardened and vitrified into space, place and erectness. 'When he began to set himself up, to stand up, he closed himself off to being permeable and porous to all things. He holds himself within bounds' (Irigaray 1999, 55). What Hopkins called 'Wild air, world-mothering air' (Hopkins 1970, 93) is '[C]onstituted as a dwelling with which man wends his way as if within the safeguard of his death' (Irigaray 1999, 61).

The mixture of the languages of command and mystical self-abandonment in Klein's formulations is odd but typical. Klein's appropriation of air to serve as the materialisation of the immaterial is in fact much more than a local or opportunist move. It is a drastic colonisation of the air by fantasy. But Klein's fantasy of the air as absolute openness, like Irigaray's, is not so much an objectification of the air as a refusal to allow the air the status of an object. Where objects give me an exterior by arresting me, putting a stop to me, Klein's air is stopped up in the bottle of his myth of universal diffusion, which means the approach to absolute uniformity. '[C]osmic sensibility', he wrote 'has no nooks and crannies, it is like the humidity in the air' (Klein 2000a, 76). Air is the amplifier and accelerator of his mighty and intransigent passion for the illimitable. 'I was no longer myself; I without "I," become joined with Life itself' (quoted Restany 90). This is the ultimate nightmare of uniformity, of egoity masquerading as vacan

Since Klein, it has increasingly been assumed that working with air is a good way to relinquish the dominative relation to objects that has contaminated art of the past. Robert Barry produced in 1969 a work called *Inert Gas Series*, which consisted of him releasing into the atmosphere above the Mojave Desert cylinders of xenon, helium and other so-called 'noble' or unreactive gases (as distinct, one must suppose, from the promiscuously hobnobbing oxygen, whose origin and explication were so curiously bound up with the

French Revolution ). The point of releasing inert gases was evidently to have as little impact on the environment as possible: 'I try not to manipulate reality', Robert Barry has said, 'not to impose my preconceived grid or preconceived system onto reality. I - to use Heidegger's phrase, let things be. What will happen, will happen. Let things be themselves' (Meyer 1972, 35). Like the gas itself, the action distinguished itself by making no, next to no, difference.

Other artists have given the imagined immateriality of the air a more spectral aspect. Ewa Kuryluk's distinctive paintings on cloth suggested the title *Air People* for the retrospective of her work in Warsaw in 2002. Andrzej Wirth identifies these 'air people', cloth figures draped over bushes and trees, with the partisans who parachuted nightly into occupied Poland during the war, and takes them as emblems for the drifting, frameless, volatile nature of Kuryluk's work.

SPIRITUS FLAT UBI VULT. Freed from corporality, [sic] Kuryluk's partisan ghosts descend on earth in the most unexpected places... Seen as painting and drawing, ... [Kuryluk's art] goes without frame and without flat surface; seen as sculpture, it goes without solid material and permanent shape; seen as walk-in installation, it lacks any directionality; seen as a performance, it arrests the distracted gaze of passersby and transforms them into performers. Her silhouettes of "people of air"...seem ready at any minute to fly into the unknown. (Kuryluk 2002, 9, 11)

Ann Veronica Janssens, who has turned in recent years to the creation of sculptures and environments made of mist, has said that 'What interests me is what escapes me, not to try and keep it from escaping but on the contrary to experience the "imperceptible" and offer that experience to others' (Rousseau 2004, 31). The soft, virtual volatility of mist, clinging, but drifting, offers a virtuous 'absence of authoritarian materiality, that effort to get out from under the tyranny of objects.' (Rousseau 2004, 29-31). Janssens emphasises, not the isolating characteristics of the artificial fogs she creates, but rather their capacity to dissolve:

Fog has contradictory effects on our vision. It makes every obstacle, all materiality, all contextual resistance, disappear, and at the same time it seems to bestow materiality and tactility on light...Bathed in light, we find ourselves transformed, blindly, one might say, and yet with no constraints or apparent limits...All our reference points have disappeared; the light no

longer shines on anything that could exercise its authority on our ambulation. (Rousseau 2004, 31)

However, before moving away from this dream of the immateriality of air, we should register an important distinction between the letting-be of Robert Barry and that of Ann Veronica Janssens. For, while Barry is interested in the process of becoming imperceptible, he does not make the ocularcentric blunder of eliding the invisible with the inexistent. Invisible objects, like the gases in the *Inert Gas* series, are still objects: 'I personally do not see a real difference between the new art and the "traditional" art of the object. This may be due to changed emphasis of certain aspects of the new objects that we did not emphasize in the object of the past, like changeability and temporality. Objects may change right before your eyes' (Meyer 1972, 36). Art of this kind may be a letting be, but it is a letting be that takes place: it is a letting-be-attended-to.

I have been saying that the air provides an elective affinity for art, which is both lost to and safely perpetuated in ubiquity. The air can do this primarily because it is taken as the promise of the deterrence and dissipation of objects.

Now, though, I want to say that the outerness of air is what makes it most essentially object. How may this be?

### **Object Air**

Let us recall what we are sure we know about objects. We believe that objects are dead, because fixed, definite and permanent. Objects have no essential relation to each other, and no relation to themselves. They exist, as Sartre puts it, *en-soi*, in, at or amid themselves but not *pour-soi*, for themselves, or in relation to themselves. For a subject to become an object is to undergo a lethal curtailing of its freedom to change its nature. Objects are subordinated to us, they are for our use, and we need them to stay the same in order to be of use. We reproach ourselves for having reduced nature to the condition of an object, dreaming that it has not always been so and hoping that we may build an ecological relationship with nature that will be characterised by the reciprocal acknowledgement of subjects. The movement into the condition of an object is a movement from free to fixed, from living to dead, from time to space, from alterable to invariant, from soft to hard, from multiplicity to singularity, from sovereign to subordinate existence. For this reason we dread, and legislate against the threat of the object. It is true that subjects seem to need objects, but subjectivity must always in the end exceed the condition of the object, must leave its successive objectifications behind as so many cast-off cerements. We know

what objects are, without having to think about them, because objects are what we know and what we know we know: for what is to know something but a making over of that thing into an object of knowledge?

All this is mistaken. In part it is a mistake because air is not, as I said it was a moment ago, an outside without an inside. For the last four hundred years, since Torricelli, Galileo, and the rest, we have slowly been establishing and extending the objectification of the air. But, in any case, far from resisting the idea of the object, the air is *essentially object*. Understanding how this might be will help us to escape the errors we systematically make about objects in general.

Objects are exteriorisations, exposures, excursions, ex-istences, makings-actual. An object is something that has emerged into the world; to become an object is to come about. An Object is not an excrement but an increment. Certainly in this respect it is a limiting, but a limiting into existence, not a limiting of it. Once the nature of air is understood, it can no longer be most of the things that it had previously been thought to be (pure, uniform, the carrier of pneuma, abode of angels and demons, and so on). But it is a limiting to the actual, not of it. The most important feature of an object is not that it is hemmed in its definition, it is that it is made exterior - exterior to a perceiving subject and exterior to itself. An object is a discovering, a developing. An object is something that stands, or is thrown, *against*.

Objects are in fact doubly exteriorising. As a making-actual of what was not previously apparent, the objected existence makes that prior inapparence appear, as a kind of hiddenness or implication; the object reads out its prior condition through its unfolding, or splitting off. Objects are therefore self-exteriorisations. But they are also exteriorisations for others, may indeed be brought into being by those others, who then have the possibility of extending themselves through those objects. For this reason, though they are finite, objects are not final. Indeed, on the contrary, objects are inaugurative. Objects do not simplify or diminish. We think of objects as possessions, and possessions as objects. So they are: but what we possess in them is possibility, theirs as much as ours.

This is because objects make possible relations. Objects are not, as we think, inert, or immune from relation. Rather, they are the primary form of relation, the engine of mediations. Without objects, there is no mediation of any kind possible between the inert and autistic things that subjects would then be. The autistic subject craves objectification, hugging his carapace of habits and routines and postures, not because he is insufficiently alive as a subject, but because he is deficient in objects, and thus is unable to establish

any grounds of relation or, what is almost the same thing, of play. What play, what game is possible without an object - a ball, a shuttlecock, or some other form of go-between? (And how many games depend upon objects that are partly constituted of air?) A relation is a going-out of my self. Only objects can give me the way of going beyond myself, the possibility of differing from myself which makes my self possible at all, precisely because objects give me a limit, put a stop to the me that would otherwise propagate gaseously in all directions. It is for this reason that Michel Serres sees social objects - money, stories, words - as 'quasi-objects', because their passages and transactions pick out and light up subjectivity. 'The quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject...We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects' (Serres 1982, 225, 227). Naturally, it would be easy enough to use this as a way to reinstitute the privative distinction between human beings, who have the privilege of picking out objects, of conferring objecthood, and the vast, mute object-world itself. But a complex world is one in which things exteriorise each other, bring each other into being as objects by disclosing or drawing out different features, in forms of attention that are also extensions, subtractions that are also attractive. The spider extrudes not just its own web, but also the intricate trigonometry of nodes and angles in the natural world on which its web's girderwork depends. The dog and the mosquito remakes the world as a map of aromas. Things form relations among themselves by exteriorising each other, which is to say by acting as objects for them and drawing them out into the conditions of objects. Every being reifies the world, and every objectification is an addition to the republic of things (every *res* is *res publica*).

So, if air is 'pure', it is in a special way, for it is purely and specially compound. As Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it in, air is 'fairly mixed/With, riddles, and is rife/In every least thing's life' (Hopkins 1970, 93). It is in the nature of air not only to surround everything, but also to pervade everything, mixing and mingling with other gases, entering into compounds through the copulative appetite of oxygen. There is an elective affinity between the chameleon air (the chameleon being a creature reputed to live on air) and the art which refuses to be restricted to any one mode of being or appearance, and is most itself when it most avidly takes leave of itself. But an art that sees this departure from itself as its special preserve, that tries to stay like itself in its departures into other forms, is merely euphoric rather than aerophoric.

There is another kind of work done on and through the air that, because it is less concerned with prolonging itself in its objectless integrity, allows air and

art to compound in the advent of objects. One example of such compounded air-art is the inflatable. In comparison with the ethereal poesis of the art of the open air, the rhetoric of the inflatable associates it with ironic and bathetic corporeality. The inflatable object is frail, delicate, but also ridiculous, always on the point of abject eruption and collapse. The works brought together by Barbara Clausen and Carin Kuoni in the exhibition *Thin Skin* in 2002 suggested this mixture of qualities (Clausen and Kuoni 2002). Paul McCarthy's huge inflatable sculptures, *Blockhead* and *Daddies Bighead*, installed outside Tate Modern in May 2003, were sinister, sleazy, parodic, cartoonish, melancholically deformed. *Blockhead* looked like a cartoon character on whom a sledgehammer or a saucepan has violently descended; but now the weapon has become the character's head, and it seems to peer through the handle as though through a tank's gun or a dalek's periscopic stalk. One could enter the giant sculpture, and buy sweets; in the interior of the sculpture, there was a loud and cavernous hiss, from the air that was continuously being pumped in to keep the thing wheezily erect. Combined with the bizarre blowhole that formed part of the head, the suggestion seemed to be that the sculpture, made largely of air standing up, was nevertheless struggling asthmatically to catch its breath.

McCarthy is not the only artist to have associated inflatables with the sensibility of the cartoon. Their association seems odd, since cartoons are supposed to be flat, but there does seem to be a strong predisposition to read the rounded figures of animated figures as air-filled volumes rather than flat planes of colour. Indeed, when the makers of *Who Killed Roger Rabbit?*, a film which mixes live and animated figures, had to decide what sound cartoon characters made when you collided with them, they decided that they would have to sound like boom and squeak like balloons. Delight and menace are to be focussed through the giant inflatable cartoon characters of Momoyo Torimitsu, such as her *Somehow I Don't Feel Comfortable* (2000), an archway formed by two giant red 5-metre high rabbits. Sean Topham captures the ambiguity represented by the inflatable; there is the promise of the balloon, that 'tightly sealed envelope filled with air that first offered access to the freedom of the sky' mixed with the threat of an enclosed, but proliferating volume of air that can construct and suffocate. (Topham 2002, 152-3).

Grander claims have sometimes been made for inflatable art and architecture, perhaps nowhere more, or more surprisingly, than in the exhibition *Structures gonflables*, mounted in March 1968 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris by architects associated with the *Utopie* group of urban theorists. The exhibition gathered together an array of inflatable objects and structures, offering them as images of pop emancipation and ephemerality. Perhaps it is in part true that, as Marc Dessauce maintains, 'the

inflatable ethos possessed a subversive constitution which recommended it to avant-garde practice' (Dessauce 1999, 14), for perhaps inflatable art was indeed an answer to the pervasive flatness of Marcuse's era of one-dimensional man, since 'it is as if the propensity to describe the epoch as lacking in relief had reflected itself in an exactly inverse manner, in an image of perpetual roundness and turgescence' (Dessauce 1999, 13). The events of May 1968 broke out just days after the exhibition closed, though a direct connection seems improbable. The associations of bubblegum and bouncy castle are never far away from inflatable air, and Dessauce is nearer the mark in claiming that pneumatic art and design ought to be seen as a grotesquely parodic exaggeration of the 'pneumatic penetration of everyday life', in automobile transport and air-conditioning:

Thus the formidable equalizing power of air-flow, and our insatiable appetite for its therapeutic and uplifting value, could also be held accountable for a loss of texture, and the deep, aerodynamic stretching of urban fabric to the point of its separation, dispersion and constriction - like the shriveled debris of a popped balloon strewn at the periphery of a defunct center. (Dessauce 1999, 14)

The catalogue of the *Structures gonflables* exhibition included a text by Claude and Léon Gaignebet, which offered a brief conspectus of some of the associations of the inflated object, which included '[a] fecundity like that evoked by a swollen phallus, a swelling breast, a blossom ready to burst, a swollen udder, a germinating seed' and '[t]he adoration of the swollen wineskin by the Ascodrugites', but also '[t]he mind of the insane, symbolized by the bladder' (Dessauce 1999, 30).

Inflatable art seems to forbid the unfettered dream of the immaterial. In inflatable art, air enters into composition, is folded or forced into new kinds of object, rather than invoking the etherial spaces of the un-object. Earlier artistic allegories of the air were bulging with material forms, often those of birds, as for example, Joachim Beuckelaer's *The Four Elements: Air, a Poultry Market With the Prodigal Son in the Background* (1570). More recently, art has returned to this manner of representing air displaced into objects. A number of examples are discussed in the recent collection *Going Aerial*, edited by Monika Bakke (2006). Not surprisingly, the most interesting hybridisings of air are to be found in its section on breath-works, since breath embodies the transcoding or compounding of air much more readily than the volatilization of things into the (imaginary) condition of air. Whether in the *Breath Cultures* of Sabrina Raaf, which grew into visible form the oral flora from participants who had breathed over Petri dishes, or her project *Translator II: Grower*, in which a small robot moved around the walls of a

room drawing shafts of 'grass' in response to the fluctuating levels of carbon dioxide in the room, the air seems to mean the necessity for translatability, an existence only in the mediations of objects. Steve Heimbecker's *Wind Array Cascade Machine* arises out of the artist's experiences of the wind in the Western Canadian prairies where he grew up, watching the progress of storms for hours as they drew near, and his recognition that 'we do not actually hear the wind, but rather hear and see objects as they are affected by the wind, such as the wind in our ears (and our microphones), the wind through the leaves of a tree, a field of mature grain blowing in the wind, or even the swirling detritus around a city building'. The Wind Array Cascade machine is an array of 64 wind-pressure sensors covering an area of 25 metres square, which are designed to mimic the behaviour of a field of grain. The data collected by the 64 sensors can be streamed, or recorded for later processing and transformation. In this work, air is not an empty ultimate condition but a sort of 'white box', a transition from a variable but always determinate input to a variable but always determinate series of outputs. The machinery embodies the indefinite process whereby the air becomes itself by being made exterior to itself.

Air offers art two forms of being and becoming. There is first of all the etherial, but annihilating dream of air as the ultimate refinement, the transcendental promise of matter subtilised to thin infinitude, indifferent spirit. But, after barely three hundred years, the materiality, and therefore the finitude of the air has become unignorable, even as it has taught us that there are many more kinds of object, and ways of being an object, than we might have thought. Air is exchanging its ulteriority for exteriority. Instead of being the embodiment of a world beyond objects and beyond bodies, the air has become the mediate arena of the object. Air is no longer an ideal image for art, but an object for it to work on, and by which to be itself worked out, worked loose even from its self-identity. In its phantasmatic assimilation of itself to the uniform dream of air as pure dematerialisation, of matter terminally rarefied into space, art keeps itself narcissistically but anxiously entire. In propagating the air into objects, art stands a chance of propagating into something beside itself.

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