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The Pneuma in Contemporary Art – From Representation to Presence and Concept

Vlad Ionescu

Zonder liefde, warme liefde, lijdt het licht, tout est fini.

Jacques Brel, *Marieke*

Introduction

Every culture looks at its own spoken and written language as the ground of its wisdom. The more meanings that a word has, the more differentiating nuances that have been perceived, hence the more perceptive that culture is. Because good thinking always presupposes a care for differences, when a culture is confronted with a certain phenomenon that it has to perpetually think through, then it is compelled to systematically make distinctions and draw conclusions on the basis of the emerging differences. The Icelandic language counts eighty-five words for “snow” even though the language has hardly changed since the 13th century; the Inuit have created fifty words for “wind” and the *Historical Thesaurus of the Scots* includes more than four hundred terms for the same notion. This varied semantic spectrum testifies to a rich sensibility that expands the aesthetic experience within that language. Aesthetics as a type of reflection has always depended on the cultivation of differences between affects, sensations and compositions.

On the other hand, various meanings can coexist in one word so that its meaning depends on the singular context where it is placed. The Greek word “pneuma” denotes different object, namely “wind”, “air” and “breath”. A continuous movement and an affirmation of life is the common meaning for all three notions.¹ The question that interests us here is *how this notion has altered the notion of representation in contemporary art?* This is a pertinent question for a general reason: the history of art is the visual story of certain motives that were borrowed from written texts or from

1 The iconography of *pneuma* has been thoroughly addressed in the last decennia and I refer here to the bibliography integrated in my *Pneumatology. An Inquiry into the Representation of Wind, Air and Breath* (Brussels: ASP Publishers, 2017). The current paper is based on the chapters of contemporary art from this book.

other images. Aby Warburg has taught us that this story is essentially the continuous transformation and reemergence of motives.² Furthermore, this transformation of motives means also a permanent transformation of *visual representation*. Images tell stories on the basis of motives that are in perpetual movement. In doing so, images also change their own structure. The following essay aims at discussing how the *pneuma* has become a privileged motif that has fundamentally altered the structure of the image in contemporary art, from the 1960s until 2013. The first task at hand is a short excursus regarding the specific impact of the *pneuma* as a motif from a formalist perspective. The question is what does *pneuma* as a motif actually modify the structure of the image? Second, the art historical corpus is then divided in three episodes that address this modification of the image in contemporary art.

The hypothesis is that the image underwent a transformation from the classical notion of *re-presentation* (as an object that relates to the world by visually interpreting it) to the image as *presence* (that presupposes the bodily movement of the viewer surrounded by wind) and finally to the image as *concept*, that is, neither an object nor a highly sensitive aesthetic environment but a text that subordinates the act of looking to an act of reading. The methodology is thus comparative and relies on a limited body of artworks, enough to mark significant transformations in the structure of the image (from representation to presence and concept). Let us first begin with a few theoretical considerations regarding the potential of the *pneuma* for a theory of the image.

Pneuma as dynamism

Dynamism as the origin of change is a known topic in Aristotle's (384BC–322BC) philosophy. On a metaphysical level, potency is "a principle producing change in something other than that in which the change takes place, or in the same thing qua other."³ The notion of agency contains this generic ability for exterior change. On a physiological level, Aristotle referred to *pneuma* both as the air that is inhaled and as an inborn force that moves the living body through its organisms.⁴ *Pneuma* designates this a specific kind of *organic* movement that keeps the body alive. It is an

2 The bibliography on Aby Warburg is endless but a good introduction remains E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Bibliography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970) and the more recent book of Marie Anne Lescourret, *Aby Warburg ou la tentation du regard* (Paris: Hazan, 2014).

3 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics, the Book V*, trans. and ed. Hugh Tredennick and Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1975), section 1020a, 255. See also Aristotle, *Metaphysics, the Book Theta*, trans. with an introduction and commentary by Stephen Malkin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), section 1046, 10–11.

4 On the relation between *anima* (the soul as actuality of a living body) and *pneuma* (as the agency moving the body) see Michael Lapidge, "Stoic Cosmology," in *The Stoics*, ed. John M. Rist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 168.

essentially *invisible* element and because of that it is a challenge for the *visual* representation. That is because every still or moving image has to address movement by either restricting or empowering its effects on other bodies. We do not see the wind but its restricting or powerful effect on leaves, dust, sand, etc. Furthermore, movement also influences the depiction of *space* because the movement of an object on any given background implies the impression of depth. Whether the cause of this movement is internal or external remains an important criterion in Western art history. *Pneuma* is a force that shapes the structure of an image and it is a figure that has represented the dynamics of the soul. Aloïs Riegl introduced a distinction between two notions that accounted for movement, namely *will* and *sentiment* (*Empfindung* in German).⁵ On the one hand, “will” is a psychological element that is visually traceable – according to Riegl – in clear outlines, in distinct and *isolated forms*, like in Antique art. On the other hand, “sentiment” designates the psychological element that amasses visual forms into indistinct shapes. “Sentiment” brings about the general *diffusion of forms*, as in Baroque art.

The *Laocoön* and the *Dying Gaul* belong to Antiquity because their expressions of pain and bodily posture are the effects of *physical* and not psychological causes. After all, the *Laocoön* depicts a bodily confrontation between a snake and a Trojan priest. “Will” is the concept that here points to the stability and discontinuity of forms. On the other hand, *sentiment* refers to the presentation of momentary positions, instable and dynamic, in a continuous movement, precisely the characteristic of Baroque visual vocabulary. The Renaissance represents the historical moment when will and sentiment are in balance.

Wind is a privileged motif for the depiction in terms of “sentiment” because of the diffusion of forms that it involves. Movement, discord and tension are attributes of a visual art where “sentiment” takes over. Leo Steinberg refers to Frederick Hartt’s interpretation of Bellini’s (1431/36–1516) *Ecstasy of St. Francis* (c. 1480) as depicting a motif with “unrecognized precedents”: the tree moved by a subtle gust of wind.⁶ The representation of the tree includes a slight bending gesture that signals their swift motion towards the saint.

This dynamism that is merely suggested in painting emerges as movement and sound in film. Joris Ivens (1898–1989)’ last work, *A Tale of Wind*, is an anthropological and artistic reflection on the *pneuma* as a transcultural phenomenon. Ivens was a director whose life stretched over most of the 20th century. Combining fiction with documentary, the Dutch filmmaker travelled from Europe to China with the goal of filming the invisible images of wind. The project of *capturing wind*

5 See Aloïs Riegl, *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom. Vorlesungen aus 1901–2*, ed. A. Burda and M. Dvorak (Vienna: A. Scholl, 1923).

6 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd, rev. and ex. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 263.

on film is actually a theme that Joris Ivens already addressed in *Pour le Mistral* (1965), a lyrical documentary where he describes the engagement of a community in the Provence with the strong winds that determine their existence, including the agriculture, architecture and social conventions. Ivens introduces wind as a dramatic character, inhuman and invisible, yet actively shaping human communities by its powerful presence.

For instance, in *Pour le Mistral*, wind appears as an architectural agent that determines the position of the houses and a sculptural force that shapes the rocks. Architectural devices are invented in order to protect the crop from its aggressive power that also “robs” a bourgeois woman who loses her pearls as they are blown away into the air. A figure of affectivity and a sculptural force, the mistral is represented as an agency which humanity has to master or at least negotiate with.

The scene of the opening credits of *A Tale of Wind* conveys the fact that the director who spent his life filming the sorrows of history, comes from a country where people “tame the sea and master the wind,” the Netherlands. Now, notions of *capturing* and *mastering* wind facilitate a possible interpretation of the film [Fig. 1]. The hypothesis here is that Ivens’ aim is the *narrativisation* of an ephemeral phenomenon that he struggles to structure and record. He tries to turn win in a narrative, a story about the wind, that interferes on all possible levels with human life. On the one hand, the film confronts the viewer with the typical Western perspective that tends to stage and control a landscape. The camera captures its movements as a powerful force that moves nature. On the other hand, the Eastern perspective cultivates wind’s magical possibilities. The wind is not just an impersonal agency but a god figure with whom one can reason or at least address in various rituals.

Further, Ivens depicts the *pneuma* in all its modalities, not just as the wind of the Chinese desert but also as the difficult breath of an asthmatic. We are here close to Aristotle’s physiological sense of the *pneuma* as an organic force and dynamic movement. The fascinating story shifts between the director’s desire to film the invisible windstorms and the desire that the latter will open up his lungs [Fig. 2]. After all, there is a Chinese proverb that says wind is the name for the moments when the earth breathes. This is indicative once again of the anthropological hypothesis that the Eastern mind addresses wind as a way of orienting oneself in the world; the goal in this cultural perspective is to establish an empathic continuity between the self as a microcosm and the universe as macrocosm. Wind is the breath of the earth and our breathing harmonizes with this perpetual inhaling and exhaling.

From a cinematic perspective, Ivens renders wind as a figure that combines sound and vision. Air currents are depicted as the sound of a human voice, a howling sound, a rustling tone or a fervent psithurism. The image of the friction of wind on leaves is combined with the recorded sound that is projected on the screen. Male and female voices overlap and introduce an entire procession of winds that surround the earth: the mistral that exasperated Van Gogh (1853–90), the wind known

as the devil of Gothic Europe, the wind from Sierra Madre that freezes you and makes you cry, the laughing wind of the wheat fields. Its names are also evoked: the Foehn but also Chili for the Tunisians, Khamsin for the Egyptians or the El Nino, the irascible child of Argentina, the mosque of Cadiz that pushes the air away from the city and goes back to the breath of creation. It is found in the Dutch windmills and in the Chinese desert. The strenuous walk through the desert provides him with a temporary cure or a consolation when he fervently inhales the strong wind of a storm. However, a trade makes the storm possible: an old witch asks for two electric fans and in return she will bring the storm. Eastern magic is traded for Western technology and Ivens remarks that it is not just science that works wonders.

The film brings us back to the control versus orientation polarity, the opposition that characterizes the Western versus the Eastern position towards the *pneuma*. There are, of course, gradations between the ways Western and Eastern cultures approach the wind. However, Ivens sets the terms of an interesting opposition. On the one hand, Westerners domesticate wind (as Ivens mentions in the opening credits), subordinating it to our needs and treating it as a means to an end (e.g. sailing, producing energy, etc.). On the other hand, in the East, wind is felt as a constant transition that determines man's orientation in the world. One does not adopt wind as physical energy but rather adapts one's breathing to it. Yet the ambition to capture wind on film is characteristic of Western man.

Throughout *A Tale of Wind*, Ivens tries to escape this documentary approach to representing wind while experimenting with its effects on the skin, on breathing and on emotions. However, documentary as a form of storytelling and the documentation of the filming process itself are procedures meant to master the myriad images of wind. Ivens experiments with the impossibility of representing wind as part of a larger scenography, like the relation between a member and the rest of the body in the Albertian *compositio*. While Alberti prescribed a gradual organization of the image from planes to members and bodies to the *historia* that they tell, Ivens installs a cinematic machine meant to record and put together sequences of a windstorm. Again, we are confronted with the main challenge that the *pneuma* poses: it is not an organism that can be divided — as an invisible force, its visual representation always presupposes a complex montage of the effects it has on other materials. The production team is mobilized to film an invisible and ephemeral presence that crosses the cameras and microphones. A general ironic (if not histrionic) atmosphere governs this scene considering that no screen is big enough to project the *pneuma*. While it curbs the spontaneity of feeling the wind, *A Tale of Wind* is a process of constant framing and staging the object it tries to document. Indicative of this controlling attitude is the situation when Chinese officials decline Ivens' wish to film the terracotta army of Emperor Qin and he stages the scene using cheap puppets sold on the tourist market.

Dynamic movement, change and restlessness motivate the transformation of the image. One can show the cause of this invisible movement which is air and one can show its effects on other objects (garments, nature, etc.). As we have shown in this section, *pneuma* is here represented as an invisible force that denotes continuity and instability in compositions, a movement that disturbs the stern arrangement of figures and demands also a dynamic attention. The view is invited to trace this lively *pneuma* and interpret the image as unfolding in time. *Pneuma* implements thus temporality in images and it is no accident that the film incorporated the wind as a real actor and a character with its own personality, visual appearance, voice and story. The film as a medium is important in this section precisely because it captures the *representation* of *pneuma* as a motif that intervenes in the structure of the image. The next step concerns a significant transformation in contemporary art, namely its change from a mere *represented* motif to its appearance as *presence*, inviting the living body of the viewer in an environment.

From representation to presence

As we have seen up to now, *pneuma* as representation fits within the canonical understanding of the image as an object that is mainly *seen* (and heard, in the case of film). However, since the 1960's, contemporary art has approached *pneuma* as an opportunity to challenge this purely optical conception of art. Prior to that period, it was Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) who already experimented with air as a way of challenging the optical values of the image surface. In *Draft Pistons* (1914), Duchamp placed a one-meter square piece of gauze net in front of a window and above a radiator. He then made three photographs of the changes that the gauze net underwent because of its exposure to the radiator's heat. When exposed to the wind, the gauze's straight lines would randomly bend. The *Pistons de Courant d'air* (*Draft Pistons*) are similar experiments with transparent surfaces that the wind disturbs.⁷ On the occasion of his sister's wedding, Duchamp sent the newlywed couple an "Unhappy Readymade", consisting of a geometry book that they were supposed to hang over a balcony until the wind tore it to pieces. Whereas the readymade was destroyed, his sister Suzanne (1889–1963) photographed and painted it. The photograph captured thus a moment of a long process where the wind was employed as an agency of time, transformation, decay. Duchamp later reproduced a photograph of the experiment in his *Boîte-en-valise* (*Box in a valise*, 1935–41).⁸ Already with Duchamp, wind and air are employed in order to challenge the strictly optical dimension of the image by means of random changes.

7 Dalia Judowitz, *Drawing on Art. Duchamp and Company* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 2010), 44.

8 See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, with an appreciation by Jasper Johns (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 61.

Now, from Marcel Duchamp to Daniel Buren (1938–) and Bruce Nauman (1941–) and Ryan Gander (1976–), an entire artistic body has emerged where the wind functions as a perennially changing force that alters the material constitution of the image and the aesthetic experience. The ability of the *pneuma* to shape matter has been a key problem in modern sculpture and installation art. Whereas painting privileges the gaze of the viewer, the density of sculpture confronts the viewer with the sense of touch and with the movement of the body. While looking at a sculpture one moves around it and reconstructs the tactile gestures involved in its formation. One need only think of Herder's (1744–1803) association of sculpture to bodies and forms that are directly touched. Herder considered seeing itself as a form of touching because the hand alone can reveal the essence of things. Breathing has a similar metamorphosing function and the cosmological act of creation can be imagined as an internal transformation of forces. Instead of Aristotelian hylomorphism — the activity of a form that shapes inert matter from the outside — Gilbert Simondon (1924–89) proposed an energetic conception of matter that *becomes form* from within itself. Matter is thus no longer an inert stuff that is transformed by imposing on it an external form but a process of internal transformation through which form emerges.

It is in this context that the act of breathing and gusts of wind modify the canonical conception of the image as a correlate strictly to be looked at. Indicative of this approach is the work of Giuseppe Penone (1947–), especially a clay sculpture entitled *Breath 5* (1976). The artist embraces a mass of clay with his body and breathes into it until it expands into an ovoid form. On an iconological level, the sculpture echoes the Biblical story of the creation. Yet instead of the hand that traces the outline of an object, Giuseppe Penone proposes the *pneuma* as an even more direct indexical force. Breathing intensifies the immediacy of chiselling or moulding, and Penone argues that, when breathing out, the air penetrates the potter's vortex; the entire act denotes the ability of “creating from nothing.”

Pneuma as presence appears in Penone's *Breath 5* as a bodily trace and a physical gesture. The work itself captures the intensity of breath but the sculpture is still a distinct object, an artefact placed in front the viewer. A different situation emerges when the viewer is literally enveloped in a *pneuma* that appears as a chromatic spectrum. In the work of Ann Veronica Janssens (1956–), air is no longer an index, a trace of a bodily presence but an environment *in between* the viewers who become increasingly aware of their bodily movement. In installations like *Blue, Red and Yellow* (2001), an artificially produced mist fills an enclosed space and viewers are invited to dwell in this colourful interior. *Pneuma* is no longer here *re-presented*, so shown as an image or a trace. To the contrary, it demands the presence of the viewer, it touches his or her body in the closed space of a corporeal encounter. *Pneuma* turns thus the image from *representation* into *presence* and in doing so it includes a temporal element, a constant change and aleatory aspect that depends on the specific

situation. After all, each body moves differently in such an environment. Viewed from the exterior, as an object, the viewer's bodily movement also alters the aspect of the interior mass.

The temporal dimension of looking and moving reemerges with an astonishing force in Janssens' collaboration with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (1960–), the performance *Keeping Still, part 1* (2007) [Fig. 3]. By subverting the optical clarity of the scene, the viewer tries to access the movements of the dancers with the broader sensing capacities of his or her body, to listen as much as to see, to let oneself be touched by the mist as much as glancing through it. Besides the sublime manipulation of light in combination with Mahler's (1827–89) *Das Lied von der Erde*, (*Der Abschied*), the airy scenography opens up the sensorial body of both the performer and the spectator. Looking becomes a desire to thoughtfully move in a blurry space.

Furthermore, Janssens' *Aerogel* (2000), a work consisting of the lightest material ever created, problematizes the status of materiality in sculpture [Fig. 4]. The material itself is practically indistinguishable from air yet it is strangely and radically distinct. It seems to have a minimal material consistency, a cohesion that can hardly be felt by the touching hand. Other than the complete immateriality of air employed by Duchamp, Janssens employs air as an infra-motif, on the borderline between materiality and immateriality. The implied desire is that the work should be as ethereal as air; it nevertheless appears to the observing eye as a solid and tectonic structure. After all, the cube is a basic architectonic shape. However, Janssens transforms the image from a purely retinal to a kinaesthetic experience. As we shall see, the motif of wind is relevant precisely for this gradual transformation of the image.

In contemporary arts, wind is employed as a *formative* element in various *in situ* installations. For instance, wind is a force that gives consistency to Daniel Buren's famous striped fabrics. The installation *Le vent souffle où il veut* (*The Wind Blows Wherever It Wants*, 2009) is an assemblage of a hundred flagpoles with weathercocks hanging from them. Part of the Beaufort 3 exhibition, the work is placed on the beach of De Haan, at the North Sea [Fig. 5]. Wind has to reach a certain speed so that the striped weathercocks blow straight out and signal its direction. Already since the '70s, the stripes in the installations of Daniel Buren have been interpreted as a critical strategy that questions the limits of visibility associated with the classical institutions of the art world, the gallery and the museum.

This aesthetics of the invisibility of the *pneuma* has arguably started in an Antwerp gallery called *Wide White Space* [Fig. 6]. In 1974, Bruce Nauman exhibited here his work entitled *Wall with Two Fans* (1970). The installation consists of a wall that divides an exhibition room while in each corner a fan blows air. The current travels along a wall that is normally used to present works of visual art, a painting or a photograph. The installation annihilates all optical values of art while it places the sensitive skin at the centre of the aesthetic experience. However, Bruce Nauman's *Wall*

with *Two Fans* does much more than debate the striated structure of the pictorial space, the artwork as representation. The work imposes onto the “viewer” a different position than the canonical horizontal distanced gaze that paintings require. One is invited to follow a stream of air across a white wall while wind directly touches the sensing body. This is a radical shift of the iconic turn: viewers do not see anything but they are ushered into a space. Hence, we no longer speak here of re-presentation but of presentation, of an environment that make present the motif of *pneuma*. Edmund Husserl’s (1859–1983) phenomenology has an interesting term for this: an image is an *image-object*, a re-presentation, an immaterial appearance that re-positions an absent object (e.g. the photographed child). The image is an object meaning a visual appearance that I perceive as colour and form regardless of the material in which it is rendered. A chair in front of me is a presentation, the intuition of a thing here and now. If the premise that *Wall with Two Fans* contains an image-object (the white wall that the artist has intentionally placed there) is accepted and if the perception of this image-object depends on more than the visual sense, then it is worth hypothesising that the installation is a limit case. Bruce Nauman’s *Wall with Two Fans* conveys the gradual dissipation of a re-presentation into a presentation, of an image into *presence*, a lived experience for the viewer.

A similar strategy appears in Yoko Ono’s (1933–) performance *Wind Piece* where the spectators are organised in such a way as to facilitate the passage of wind. Performed in 1962 at the Sogetsu Art Centre (Tokyo), it included a huge fan on a stage. The piece was also staged in 1966 at Wesleyan University (Connecticut) where the “audience was asked to move their chairs a little and make a narrow aisle for the wind to pass through. No wind was created with special means.”⁹ In the autumn of 1961, Ono also wrote a vocal piece for soprano that consisted of three screams against the wind, the wall and the sky. In all these performances, the bodily experience of the passing air is central. Also, the self-awareness of the moment echoes Zen Buddhism and its cultivation of full presence in the moment.

The transfiguration of the visible plane into a pure tactile experience reemerged quite recently at the Documenta 13 (Kassel, 2012). Ryan Gander confronted the viewer with his installation *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize (The Invisible Pull)*. “To display” or “to exhibit” are inappropriate words for the experience that Gander had in mind. The installation consists of a gust of wind that travels through the main venue of the exhibition, the Fridericianum. As in the case of the Wide White Space gallery, here, too, the tactile experience of the kinaesthetic body is increased because of the surrounding white walls. The neutral visible field confers a tender quality upon tactile experience. On the other hand, under the regime of contemporary arts, with Nauman

9 Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit. A Book of Instructions and Drawings*, introduction by John Lennon, with a new introduction by the author (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), s.p.

and Gander, this entire *visual* scenography is directed towards the *tactile* body of the beholder. Firstly, the viewer is no longer a *spectator* — the unshakeable subject of *spectare* — but a *witness* of a sensation that he or she experiences while moving, looking and sensing. The content of the experience is the same, namely the quality of time's unfolding, yet its presentation brackets the visual regime entirely. The air and breeze make us witness the here and now sensation of the body moving in space. The question is the *Invisible Pull* is still an image in the phenomenological sense of the word. Its “invisibility” eliminates the dimension that would describe it as an image-object, as a visual appearance distinct from its medium: canvass, stone, clay, photographic paper, etc. There is nothing to see as such. However, its material support, namely, breeze, is direct, but again, not visual. While it transgresses all the canonical prerequisites of the optical regime of arts, the *Invisible Pull* is a *spatialising* mechanism that makes present the moment where representations disappear and lived experiences take over. Space is here an architectural interior that the viewer is invited to enter and pursue. In other words, as an installation, *Invisible Pull* is not an image but an architectural device that exploits the movement of the body in space. Slightly touching the moving body, breeze emphasises this openness of space by making it tactile.

In this sense, the installation is a reflection on a classical problem of representation, namely, how to address space and how to represent a story? Simplifying to the extreme, the formalist of art history have pointed out that the Western conception of visual representation is founded on the notion of *space*: from the Egyptian regime that radically represses the third dimension and represents only surfaces, via the Late Roman and Byzantine art, where the colourful background becomes more dynamic, up to the Renaissance when it is subordinated to the strict rules of perspective, and finally, with the Baroque that cultivated the visual effects of a seemingly infinite spatial unfolding. According to formalists like Riegl or Wölfflin, images seem to have always problematized space. Even later, certainly in the case of Greenberg (1909–94), modernism further questions the relation of space to the flatness of the pictorial plane. Beyond these known intrigues of art history, Gander's installation annihilates this visualisation of space at the price of becoming an architectural mechanism that subtly follows the body within the space of the gallery. Even more, its function is clearly defined in the title *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize*: the gentle breeze provides the memory of art history with a spatial dimension. After all, the *Invisible Pull* wavers through the interior space of a meticulously curated exhibition.

The Invisible Pull mediates a dialectic between remembering and forgetting. On the one hand, we are caressed by a gentle breeze until we are seduced into forgetfulness; on the other hand, the invisible pull does push us into different directions. The installation exploits precisely this ambiguity of breeze: moving bodies are addressed at the most fundamental level. They are touched and fondled, cooled into apathy, but at the same time pushed towards a space that houses the *Brain* of

the exhibition. This is a space that functions like an atlas of associations: it brings together Giorgio Morandi's (1890–1964) bottles, painted in Bologna under a Fascist government, Giuseppe Penone's *Essere Fiume 6* (a found river stone and its copy in Carrara marble), objects from the Lebanese civil war and stone books from the Afghan valley, the battlefield of Taliban warriors. Further, Eva Braun's perfume, a bath towel inscribed with Adolf Hitler's initials followed by Lee Miller's (1907–77) in the dictator's bathtub, after American forces liberated Munich. Gander's *Invisible Pull* ushers the viewer in this curated space that constitutes the heart of the Documenta exhibition.

From presence to concept

These artistic experiments changed the conception of the image as *visual* representation into a *bodily* presence. In all cases, the *pneuma* — as wind and air — has been the central material that yielded this modification in the structure of artistic representation. The dynamics and the tactile values of *pneuma* have privileged this alternative shift in the reception of the image. Instead of *visually* representing space (as perspectival depth or as subtle variation on a surface), the described artworks employed wind and air in order to make the living body aware of its spatial movement and its presence. Nevertheless, in all of these cases, the *pneuma* still keeps the viewer within the realm of the *sensible*, namely the tactile feeling, the wind literally touching the skin of the viewer. If it is not the visual representation of wind, Gander still confronts us with its tactile presentation.

This motif takes a different twist during the '60s but in a radically different artistic context, one that debated the entire aesthetic dimension of artistic production. Terry Atkinson (1939–) and Michael Baldwin (1945–) are the representatives of the conceptual art movement *Art and Language*. In 1966–67, they have approached air as a subject that completely eradicated the sensible aspect (visual or tactile) of the image. Their *Air Show* (1966–67) consists of collection of texts and investigations concerning air. The texts were subsequently published and Joseph Kosuth (1945–) curated an exhibition based on them that included an actual air conditioner.¹⁰ The writings concern the quality of an air conditioner as an invisible and immaterial sign. Instead of showing or feeling the cold air, the artists describe its properties. These types of experiment generated a debate about the dematerialisation of art as a sort of post-aesthetic that distances itself from the visual medium.¹¹

Terry Atkinson responded to this notion of dematerialisation by closely analysing the notion of matter.¹² If matter is understood as a mass of energy extending in time and experienced by a

10 The texts were published in a limited series of two hundred copies entitled *Air Conditioning Show, Air Show, Frameworks* (1966–67).

11 See the article of Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialisation of Art," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art. A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999), 46–50.

12 See Terry Atkinson, "Concerning the Article 'The Dematerialization of Art,'" in *Conceptual Art. A Critical*

sentient body, then the dematerialisation of art should not just mean that art distances itself from the visual medium but that it has become completely unperceivable, a “non-entity.”¹³ An artwork can be in a solid state but also consist of gas or liquids. Three decennia later, Ann Veronica Janssen created *Aerogel* (2000), a work consisting of the lightest material ever created. The fragile work problematizes the status of materiality in sculpture. The material itself is practically indistinguishable from air yet it is strangely and radically distinct. It seems to have a minimal material consistency, a cohesion that can hardly be felt by the touching hand. As shown before, Janssens exploits this border between materiality and immateriality.

However, Atkinson went even further: he argued that a mathematical equation can also have aesthetic qualities depending on “how effectively the written format expresses the information relevant to the state, situation, etc. it is seeking to describe/ explain.”¹⁴ Beauty depends on whether the beholder is trained in detecting it. Hence, a scientist can “read-look” (the term belongs to Atkinson) the beauty of an equation because he can comprehend it. The text is yet another argument for conceptualism in art: beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder but in her ability to interpret a given phrase.

Atkinson evoked along this distinction between the acts of reading and looking, the distinction between two types of beauty: on the one hand, one can merely look at a written equation without considering its truth-value; on the other hand, one can perceive it while “reading-looking” (at) it and employ one’s mathematical knowledge. Simply put, one can look at an equation purely as form or one can actually comprehend its mathematical meaning. Both situations are judged as beautiful yet they also mark the famous distinction that Kant (1724–1804) made between a *pure* and an *impure* aesthetic judgment. Whereas “looking-reading” the equation involves a concept and is thus its aesthetic evaluation is impure, the mere presentation of the equation as form becomes the correlate of a pure aesthetic judgment. Needless to say, the example tests the limits of the Kantian aesthetic judgment because — strictly speaking — it is impossible to merely look at an equation without the application of concepts.

A similar strategy appears in Yoko Ono’s instruction paintings. Consisting of a series of utterances containing instructions that describe what the viewer is supposed to do or at least imagine, Yoko Ono’s instruction paintings contain wind as a force to be imagined. There is no need to reproduce an image of these instruction paintings; like the works of Atkinson and Baldwin, they consist of typed words. Take the three *Pieces for the wind*: “Cut a painting up and let them be lost in

Anthology, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999), 52–59.

13 Atkinson, “Concerning,” 53.

14 Atkinson, “Concerning,” 55.

the wind. 1962 summer”; “Cut a hole in a bag filled with seeds of any kind and place the bag where there is wind. 1961 summer”; “Make a whole. Leave it in the wind. 1961 autumn.” Or the *Smell Piece*: “Send smells by wind. 1963 Summer.”¹⁵

The word “painting” is confusing in this case because the artist does not provide this instruction with a unique material medium: canvass, paper, wood, etc. As an immaterial statement or not yet materialized, the artwork is a mere thought, an idea but not a physical gesture or a sensation. As Yoko Ono herself pointed out, people are free to approach these instructions as purely imaginative acts, like conceiving a building blurred by the wind that passes through it.¹⁶ With instruction paintings, the viewer is no longer a passive onlooker but can be an active performer. Even though they are made up of words, the aesthetic experience does not depend on the metaphorical value of the utterances but on the imaginary dynamics that they can produce in the spectator’s mind. Even though the performance may not bring about an intervention in the world, the instruction paintings do aim at affecting the mind of the performer. The agency of this imaginary play is the idea of *pneuma*. But while in the performance *Wind Piece* the bodily experience of the wind was central, in the instruction paintings the wind is just a correlate that has to be imagined.

The experiments of Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin are not concerned with a *dematerialisation* of art but with what I call its *desensitization* or the *eidetic reduction* of beauty. His texts are presented as “shows” entitled *The Air Conditioning Show* or *The Air Show* and thus point to a tactile and sensible layer. Nevertheless, the promise of the sentient experience is abandoned and the object “air” is revealed to consciousness as a pure intuition. Terry Atkinson’s texts work because they thematise what they radically question, the limitation of aesthetic judgments to sensitive objects. Wind and air are employed here as intuitions that are presented textually, as symbols that can be read instead of gazed at.

Atmosphere

The experiments of Atkinson and Baldwin concern the shift from the visual to the haptic and further to the conceptual experience of the wind. More recently, Amy Balkin (1967–) has integrated the motif of the *pneuma* in an ethical and ecological debate. The American artist is interested in the relationship between humans and the environment that they interact. There is a great difference between her “conceptual” approach and the formalist intellectual games of the conceptual art from the ‘60s and ‘70s. Amy Balkin’s work consists of concrete analyses — in images and words — of

15 Ono, *Grapefruit*, s.p. On the instruction paintings, see Eva Yi Hsuan Lu, “Instruction Paintings. Yoko Ono and 1960’s Conceptual Art,” in *Shift. Graduate Journal of Visual and Material Culture* 6 (2013): 1–20.

16 Hans Ulrich Obrist and Yoko Ono, *The Conversation Series 17* (Köln: Walther König, 2009), 17.

how humans affect Earth's atmosphere. Wind is a force that influences the quality of life. Breathing makes air an indisputable common that we cannot sell and purchase like any other material. In this context, Amy Balkin has created a work that consisted of a proposal urging UNESCO to include Earth's atmosphere on the organization's World Heritage List. In August 2012, fifty thousand copies of this proposal were signed and sent to the German Minister of the Environment. Another forty thousand copies followed in September 2012 and in November the Minister declined the invitation.

As with many works of public art, the exhibition constitutes just one part of an activity that includes the broader global community. Exhibited at the Documenta 13, the project *Public Smog* displayed a series of reactions to Amy Balkin's proposal, other diplomatic rejection letters. [Fig. 7] However, in her plea, she argues that the atmosphere complies with the criteria for selection established by the UNESCO. These criteria include the object's "natural beauty and aesthetic importance" or the fact that the Earth is the central memory of life's cycles.¹⁷ Aesthetic and historical values are mentioned in the UNESCO criteria that are to be considered in the artist's plea for the protection of Earth's atmosphere. The question is whether UNESCO is capable of conceiving beauty as a global instead of a fragmented reality.

Public Smog is an ongoing process of raising awareness. Air and breathing challenge the very nature of an artwork whose material is the most fundamental common, Earth's atmosphere, a dimension without which neither human creation, nor memory makes any sense. With Amy Balkin, the work of art stands for protecting the work of nature, the kind of sensibility that Alois Riegl optimistically thought typical of modern man.¹⁸ For the Austrian art historian, the "age value" (*Alterswert*) is experienced as the feeling that emerges when the modern viewer sees his life as belonging to the natural universal order. Other than the knowledge that artistic or historic value provide, the "age value" is essentially a form of affective memory. We realise that humans, like any other organism, live and die. This knowledge brings about in modern man a feeling of melancholic resignation.

In 1905, Riegl argued that this melancholic resignation presupposes a high degree of altruism, a virtue that is perceivable in the care that modern man takes of natural monuments, like forests. That means that we are able to see nature not just as a means to an end, but also as purposeful in and for itself. After all, "the cult of the natural monument is the least interested: it desires from us the living, an occasional offering to a lifeless thing of nature."¹⁹ Whereas Kant bordered the

17 See "The Criteria for Selection," Unesco, accessed April 16, 2022, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

18 See Alois Riegl, "Neue Strömungen in der Denkmalspflege," *Mitteilungen der K.K. Zentralcommission*, Dritte Folge 4 (1905): 85–104.

19 Riegl, "Neue Strömungen," 91. The original reads: "Der Kultus der Naturdenkmale ist der alleruninteressierteste: er verlangt von uns Lebenden mitunter Opfer für ein lebloses Naturding."

realm of aesthetics as the domain of a “disinterested pleasure”, Riegl finds an analogous existential feeling that corresponds to the cult of nature, the most disinterested. Specific to the modern cult of monument is that it does not approach a monument as a human work but as a work of nature. Hence, the style that corresponds the most to this modern attitude is landscape painting.

The care that Riegl (1858–1905) evoked in the context of nature’s “age value” corresponds to Amy Balkin’s plea for the protection of Earth’s atmosphere. Both the American contemporary artist and the Viennese art historian would agree that art makes sense only if nature too, is treated as an artwork. The challenge is no longer the opposition of art to nature, Riegl’s conception of artistic creation as a contest with nature. With Riegl, modern man could conceive nature as if it were an artwork. With Amy Balkin, the challenge consists in the treatment of nature by means of art. The Darwinism that justified Riegl’s theory implied a fundamental will-to-form that is active in visual arts just as it is in nature. In Balkin’s work, Riegl’s contest with nature becomes the harmony between man and nature, a general sensibility for the atmosphere of the Earth as a shareable given. Wind turns the quality of air in a fundamental common value that nations all over the world are invited to share. The idea of treating Earth’s atmosphere as a marketable space is counterintuitive; it denotes universal neo-liberal ambitions: air, like any other good, is translatable in marketable emission offsets. The ambitions are absurd considering that pollution is not something that can be negotiated, like shares, goods or capital.²⁰ National borders can hardly ever enclose a nuclear disaster like the one at Fukushima. It is on this point that wind and air become trans-national, “natural inalienabilities” that culture has to cherish.²¹

Hence, in Amy Balkin’s work, wind is, first of all, an opportunity to think of air as a shared common, as a dimension of life that cannot be privatised. An extension of *Public Smog* consists of “purchasing and retiring emission offsets in regulated emissions markets, so that they are no longer accessible to polluting industries.”²² The public is thus encouraged to invest in his generic park in the atmosphere that continuously changes its scale and location. Second, instead of playing with the transformation of a sensation into a concept, Amy Balkin addresses wind as the force that accounts for the dynamics of her process-work, i.e. an artwork that is conceived as a social process. Her work is intrinsically processual; the atmosphere in a perpetual movement because of the passage of wind. Air is a common good without being localisable.

However, Balkin’s process-work includes both an activity and an archive, the snapshots of images and letters, visual and textual reminiscences. Other similar projects include *Atmosphere, A*

20 On the relationship of contemporary art to ecology see T.S. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Stemberg Press, 2016).

21 Lewis Hyde, *Common as Air. Revolution, Art and Ownership* (London: Union, 2012), 163.

22 “Public Smog,” WordPress, accessed April 16, 2022, <http://publicsmog.org>.

Guide (2013/16), a visual essay that records “various human influences on the sky and their accumulated traces, whether chemical, narrative, spatial, or political.”²³ Following the same intuition that sees the work of art as a work of art, this project can be considered a contemporary “landscape painting”. However, instead of painting on a canvas, Balkin generates an archive of humanity’s own way of “painting” the atmosphere.

Third, the significance of wind in public art, is related to the radical questioning of the border between art and nature. The conception of art as a way of *competing* with nature returns as the conception of art as a way of the harmony between man and nature. Whereas from Enlightenment forward, nature was thought to be at the service of culture, in our late modernity, the *care* for nature has become a sign of culture. Nevertheless, Amy Balkin’s work is not just a plea for empathy, the affectivity that Riegl saw in the “age value” and in modern man’s attitude towards landscapes. With public art, wind becomes a motif that is not merely represented as an image but that demands performativity, strategy and communicability. After all, the process-work of Amy Balkin consists of activities meant to intervene and change the *status quo*. She writes letters, expects reactions from political authorities and encourages people to continue the processes that she has initiated. Wind is neither bodily present and felt in the space of the gallery or of the public square; nor is it an opportunity to speculate on its translation from a visual (iconographic motif) to its conceptual representation (as in the case of Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin).

In the case of this ecological and social art, the artistic process is woven into the texture of life. Instead of artistic creation maybe we should speak of ecological adaptation. Because air, breathing and wind are commons that we all share despite economic differences, they become the quintessential motives of the contemporary attempts to fuse art and life. Maybe the Eastern philosophy is right to cultivate breathing to the point that meditating is a way of life. Maybe there is an alternative to the Western distinction between fine art and nature. Maybe the only aesthetic experience that we can hope for in the future is breathing.

Quite literally placing life at the centre of art, Amy Balkin negotiates this traditional distinction and cultivates air, wind and breath as unquestionable commons. With all these strategies of intersubjective communication, the artwork is no longer an object but a process and — hopefully — an event. Her work constitutes a subcategory of this shift from representation to presence and concept: socially engaged art is conceptual in the sense that it reduces art to an opportunity to reflect on the state of the world. We are still in the confines of the artworld, the Documenta in Kassel, but the artworld is here employed strictly because it is a public forum where questions of public interest are (allegedly) debated. Instead of mere representation or presence of air, art is supposed to

23 “The Atmosphere,” Amy Balkin, accessed April 16, 2022, <http://tomorrowmorning.net/atmosphere>.

urge the global community into action.

Conclusion

Pneuma is a privileged motif in the history of contemporary art because it has been consistently and repeatedly employed in order to challenge the status of the image as a visual sign. We have distinguished thus three types of transformations that the image has undergone in contemporary arts. The goal of these structures is generic and they do not aim at exhaustingly explaining all art historical primary sources where the *pneuma* is a central motif. They explain actualisations of this motif in order to, most importantly, demonstrate how the motif transforms the working of an image as such. After all, this is the main significance of the *pneuma* in contemporary arts: it has transformed the visualising mechanism of the image by questioning the distance that images have always presupposed. A generic trajectory of this motif can thus be traced: from the visual representation of the *pneuma* as an image to its *tactile* and *bodily* presence, in the sense that wind and air are felt by the living body in a highly sensitive environment. From this stage on, we have also detected a turn toward a conceptual use of air as an idea in the work of Arkinson, Yoko Ono or the socially engaged artistic practice of Amy Balkin.

First, in the case of Penone, the visible and tactile effects of wind are integrated in the structure of the image. Two attributes are central: on the one hand, wind is here a material cause that the artist manipulates and integrates within an autonomous work of art. On the other hand, we are still here in the traditional aesthetic regime of arts where the viewer faces the artwork, even though the latter stimulates both the tactile and the visual sense.

Second, Bruce Nauman and Ryan Gander employ the *pneuma* as a strategy of eradicating the *visual* as such and propose a purely tactile experience as an artwork. In this realm of installation art, wind is no longer a material force that acts on the perception and identity of an artwork, like in the case of Calder and Penone. Here, wind is a relational force, acting on the viewer's body in order to manipulate his or her position in a given architectural space. The *pneuma* is not a force that transforms the work but a directive impetus that literally touches the spectator and makes her or him aware of a position within an interior architecture. If Gander's work is presented in a natural space, then the relation between body and space determine its interpretation. However, in the context of the Fridericianum, as we have seen, the *pneuma* is an invisible pull that pushes the body in a complex (art) historical scenography.

Third, Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin and Yoko Ono bracket the bodily experience all together and propose wind as the correlate of an eidetic representation. The *pneuma* here is one element that is intuited by a viewer who is supposed to test its affect (Atkinson, Baldwin) or imagine it (Ono). In the context of conceptual art, wind has a negative potential because of its otherwise

highly sensitive value. Here, the conceptual artist reduces an object that is the epitome of what he or she wishes to eliminate, the preeminent position of the gazing and moving viewer. Amy Balkin goes even further and employs the experience of the wind as a means to raise awareness. The “conceptual” aspect of her art no longer concerns a reflection on the medium but an interventionist stance. The *pneuma* — breathing and the air we breathe — is a different kind of motif, no longer iconological but ecological. In this way, contemporary art becomes a question of awareness and performativity, at least claiming to intervene in the fabric of life.

[Fig. 1] *Recording the wind, A Tale of the Wind* (1988), director Joris Ivens, Paris: Capi Films, London: Channel Four.

[Fig. 2] *Ivens breathing in the wind, A Tale of the Wind* (1988), director Joris Ivens, Paris: Capi Films, London: Channel Four.

[Fig. 3] Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Ann Veronica Janssens (1956–), *Keeping Still (part 1)* (2007), courtesy of the artists.

[Fig. 4] Ann Veronica Janssens, *Aerogel* (2000), courtesy of the artist.

[Fig. 5] Daniel Buren (1938–), *Le Vent Souffle où il Veut* (2009), work in situ, photo-souvenir, Beaufort 03, De Haan.

[Fig. 6] Bruce Nauman, *Wall with Two Fans* (1970), *Wide White Space Gallery*; photo R. Van den Bempt, courtesy Anny De Decker/ Archive Wide White Space, Antwerp.

[Fig. 7] Amy Balkin, Letter urging UNESCO to inscribe Earth’s atmosphere on the organization’s World Heritage List, part of *Public Smog*, Documenta 13 (2012), Kassel, courtesy of the artist.

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