



*Habit de Marchand Miroitier Lunettier*  
à Paris, Grande.

Habit de marchand miroitier lunettier, ca 1680, engraving by Nicolas de Larmessin  
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## II

# METEOROLOGICAL UTOPIAS

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*Hanna Husberg*

### IMMATERIALITY

Artists have often been called the mirrors of society. We live here and now, and often work with what surrounds us. Although we transform what we see and experience, we are still inevitably influenced by it. Several times I have had the feeling of working with things that are in the air, this impalpable yet immersive quality that cannot be apprehended directly. My practice has also been much about immateriality, about process and change, often ephemeral and vanishing. As Nicolas Bourriaud wrote on Yves Klein, immaterial sensibility is a gas, an atmosphere I try to grasp by the use of intuition.

In a talk given at Art Basel in 2007, titled *Next to Nothing: the arts of air*, Steven Connor gave an overview of how air has become an allegory of art. As air, art consists of nothing in particular. Art aims at expanding the range of its applications and operations. It seeks to assume an air-like way of being, propagating into everything, mingling and mixing. Air is everywhere, and still it brings up the idea of not being there, and by extension art's capacity to summon and sustain this condition of next to nothing. Duchamp's *Air de Paris* from 1919 is an interesting example of this.

The bulb, emptied and resealed at a pharmacy in Havre, and given to his friends the Arenbergs, didn't contain air from the capital. When the bulb broke in 1949, Duchamp asked a friend to re-purchase the same bulb at the same pharmacy in Havre to reproduce the work. Again it would not contain air from Paris. What the flask actually contains is of lesser importance, and the air rather brings up the idea of not being there. If art can be even nothing or close to nothing then art can be everything.

## ATMOSPHERE

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Several contemporary artists have worked with atmosphere. Hans Haacke's Condensation cube (1963-65), Henrik Plenge Jakobsen's Laughing gas chamber (1996), Diller & Scofidio's *Blur Pavillion* (2002), Anthony Gormley's *Blind light* (2007), the luminous sculptures of Ann Veronica Janssens and the work of Olafur Eliasson, are some examples which come to my mind. They might be the inheritors of "the vaporisation of sculpture" envisioned in the the Dimensionist Manifesto published by Charles Sirato in 1936 and signed by amongst others Arp, Picabia, Kandinsky, Delaunay, Duchamp. The manifesto reads: "Rigid matter is abolished and replaced by gazefied materials. Instead of looking at objects of art, the person becomes the center and the subject of creation; creation consists of sensorial effects taking place in a closed cosmic space."

Air has been considered a good way of dealing with the past idolatry of objects, and a good way for art to refuse to be reduced to, or mistaken for the objects it has traditionally been referred to as being. The work of Yves Klein was of importance in this development. Klein approached air in a mystic principle of expansion and dissolving. In the late 50s he realized that the transparency of empty air would be an even better aperture on to the void than his ultramarine blue paintings. His show *The Void* at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris in 1958, was of an empty gallery, with a staged entrance procedure for the opening night. 3000 people queued up for the opening and the police were called by visitors angry at having paid \$3 to see nothing.

The artist explained the object of this endeavour to be the creation of an ambience, a genuine pictorial climate, and, therefore, an invisible one. He was at the time collaborating with the architect Werner Ruhnau and developed a series of projects and fantasies of a global architecture of air. They proposed climatic conditioning of all regions of the earth, which would allow human beings to live in a state of Edenic repose. In the same period Buckminster Fuller described his 3 km geodesic dome spanning midtown Manhattan. Fuller envisioned cutting people off from the elements by building domed cities offering climate control. Cost savings in 10 years would pay the costs of the dome.

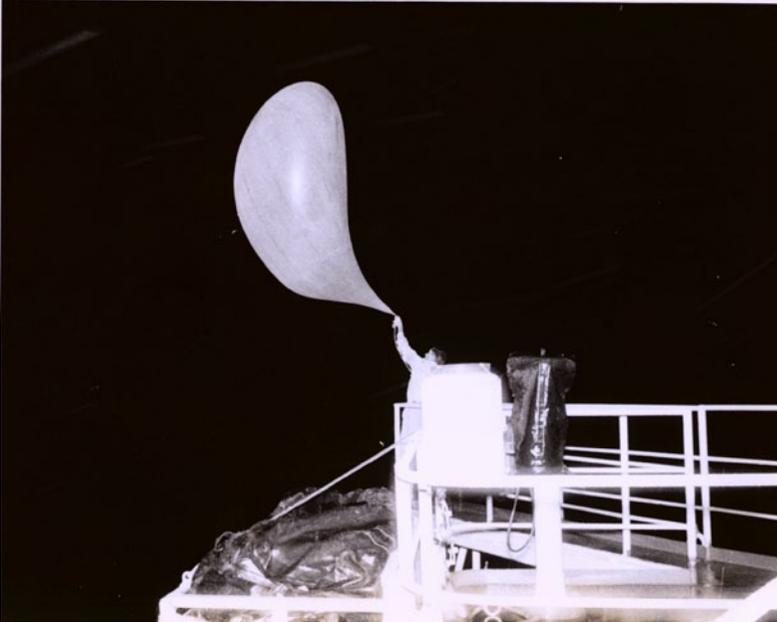
These images of domed cities with their sealed and controllable environments actually appeared in literature already in the late 19th century as part of the response to the fast growing new science of Meteorology, termed in the 17th century and developed along with scientific advances by natural philosophers as Francis Bacon, and his vision of an ideal humanity based on discovery and knowledge. Bringing us to my current research project, and its working title, Meteorological utopias. Meteorological as it is the study of the atmosphere, the layers of gases that may surround a material body, and utopias, in plural, as a reminder of utopia's changing character.

## AIR

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Air is the part of the atmosphere we are most commonly in contact with, the part we use for breathing. Air started to be looked into at a time when air pollution became an issue. John Evelyn's book *Fugifugium, or The Inconveniencie of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated*, was the first book published on the growing air pollution problem in London. Ten years later Robert Boyle published *Suspensions about the Hidden Realities of the Air*, advancing the notion that air is not a homogenous, inactive vacancy, but rather an aggregate of effluvia of different minute bodies. Progressively ancient beliefs of miasma or night air, the poisonous vapor or mist from swamps and decomposed matter, which was believed to cause sickness were replaced by new theories. Germs were discovered and in Bristol a Pneumatic institute was opened, where medical use of gases were experimented. One of the chemists working at the institute, Humphrey Davy experimented on himself and his friends. He notably discovered the euphoric qualities of nitrous oxide and named it laughing gas. Laughing gas parties soon became popular in the British upper class.

Eventually the experiments evolved to being made on life-scale and in real time, becoming collective experiments with no-one in charge. Projects of changing the courses of currents, provoking rain and stopping hail started to seem possible. Benjamin Franklin's lightning rods were believed to provoke earthquakes and invisible forces were becoming more present.



*NOAA's National Weather Service, Antarctic waters, 1964  
Courtesy of Mr. Monte Poindexter, NWS*

These scientific discoveries were mirrored in contemporary Utopian literature by projections of what we today call geo-engineering. In Howell's *Traveller from Altruria*, climate had been considerably improved and weather control was one of the main priorities. Words as atmosphere were also starting to be used in art. Turner famously stated that "atmosphere was his style" and art critique John Ruskin, a big defender of Turner, wrote extensively on meteorological phenomena.

### UTOPIAN METEOROLOGY

Deriving from the homonymous book published by Thomas More in 1516, Utopia has gradually become a common name for ideal societies. Thereby spawning other concepts as dystopia, the bad place,

which is the idea of a society in a repressed and controlled state, often described as utopian by the ones in control. As often said, one man's utopia is another man's dystopia.

Utopia, means no place. Eutopia means good place. Both are Greek neologisms invented by More and both are pronounced in the same way. Utopia should thus be taken as a fiction. Probably as a means to be able to criticize the society in which he was living and propose a political imagination using a fiction of a better world.

Utopia is divided into two parts, the first of which situates the story in 16th century Europe with its social anomalies. The second part depicts a rational and happy society which is also an antithesis of the 16th century English society. It is a communist society without property, it is not a democracy, but rather a totalitarian state, governed by strict rationality. More's Utopia was written in a time when social philosophers and theologians were promoting the concept of Optimism, according to which we live in the best of all possible worlds. The utopian fictions were texts meant to arouse reflection and action in opposition to the Optimist ideology which is passive and submissive to the world as it is.

Meteorological utopias thus departs from this condition of man-as-creator, wanting to modify for the better or the worse his environment. Today this could be exemplified by the failed attempt of Biosphere 2 in Arizona in the 1980s. Biosphere 2 recreated a mini-Earth of 13 km<sup>2</sup>, with representative species and topologies from five planetary biomes. In 1991, eight biospherians entered this sealed environment for a period of two years, during which the attempt was to grow the food needed, metabolize the wastes and produce the optimal atmosphere to support life. All pollinators died in the artificial ecosystem as did 19 of 25 vertebrate species, the humans survived only through injection of oxygen from outside.

Another familiar example could be the industry of air-conditioning. In post World War 2, air-conditioning became very successful in public spheres, as shopping halls, where man-made weather and atmosphere were considered beneficial. Abandoning the traditional windows in residential areas was a more difficult goal for the industry promoting the superiority of air-conditioning. They solved the problem by adapting the houses for an air-conditioned world, marketing sealed picture

windows for the new television age, with houses conveniently overheated needing a good central air-conditioning system.

in *Terror from the Air* Peter Sloterdijk talks about black meteorology and the everyday dwelling in latency waiting for the next atmospheric event. It seemse are again afraid of the sky falling down, and today we know the sky contains microbes, radioactivity, pollution and electro-magnetic waves.

In 1955 John von Neumann, the mathematician, who played a key role in building the H-bomb and also produced important meteorological understanding which may be used in climate control, published a prominent article "Can we survive technology?" In the article von Neumann writes: Present awful possibilities of nuclear warfare may give way to others even more awful. After global climate control becomes possible, perhaps all our present involvements will seem simple. We should not deceive ourselves: once such possibilities become actual, they will be exploited.

Von Neumann also points out that the very techniques that create dangers and instabilities are in themselves useful, and that inhibiting this or that form of technology is not a solution, that there is no cure for progress.

The idea of working around concepts of atmospheric control arises as a means to look at these progressivist ideas at a time in which we are confronted to limitation of resources. I have naturally been drawn to a certain alienation and anxiety I find in our contemporary landscapes. I think of these in terms of space, as an estrangement from our terrestrial situation or perhaps even an atmospheric alienation. There is also an idea of a subnature, a nature envisioned as threatening and a feeling of our living environment becoming uncanny and unhomely. I'm interested in the state of change and uncertainty that generate these feelings. Contemporary crises put us in situations of not being able to do nothing and having to do something with unpredictable outcome. Alienation can be a sense of incapacity of acting and a drive to escape the limitations of terrestrial life, and an urge to going aerial in a search for the "ungrounded".

Although invisible technology had already since long surrounded us, I probably started thinking of air and it's condition as a conductor during a workshop with Swiss architect Philippe Rahm in 2004.

We made an exhibition, Ghostscape at Villa Savoye, where I re-introduced water in Corbusier's building which since the beginning had been subject to infiltrations. I connected the many water containers of the villa by filling them with water and creating a network of interior lakes. A very simple action notably changed the perception of the space. Later works have often reused air and water. In these fluids there is an idea of "ungroundedness" and a sensation of disorientation, or loss of self.

I have a practice which consists of framing or creating landscapes in a large sense. These can be produced through an intervention or installation or using mostly moving images and sound. As we know landscape painting arrived rather late in art history and marks the stages in our conception of nature and culture. After the abstraction and a movement towards the purification of the visual field during the modernism, landscape has today become an allegory for the social.

Over the last years I have gradually come to a research practice, collecting information, images and stories. The information becomes a material I'm working with and constitutes a framework for my practice to develop in. I am interested in a historical approach as it gives a feeling of how our perception has changed over time. Reading facts and stories referring to climate control and how we perceive the air we breathe and that surrounds us, is also a way of understanding the atmospheric features in art I have naturally been appealed by. I don't consider my work to be documentary nor historic, it is rather a subjective selection based on my interests. I feel the truth of fiction is a truth beyond mere facts and that fictive reality may transcend the physical or everyday reality.

The research also advances through my art practice, making and working with images or sound and by experimenting with different materials, thinking of how the ideas I'm working with can take form. Rather than trying to produce one work which concentrates everything, I'm thinking of different works and about creating connections in space. My approach generally starts by observation. I then try to capture an essence which can take a form. I then need to resolve how to make that form. Specific projects might demand technical assistance and consultancy as well as getting a general overview of the techniques that are implied. Throughout the process new questions arise. Making art is a process with no end.