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# Museum atmospheres: notes on aura, distance and affect

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This paper, taking its cue from Gottfried Korff's theory of museum display, reflects upon the atmospherics of museum objects. When Korff develops his idea that museums provide a 'brokering service' to do with the regulation of distance, he invokes Walter Benjamin's formulation of 'aura', which is understood to arise out of an interplay of proximity and distance, emanating from what Theodor Adorno would describe as the 'more of the phenomenon' that exceeds its raw facticity. Benjamin's concept is also taken up by the philosopher Gernot Böhme in his influential theorisation of atmospheres as aesthetic phenomena. Böhme clearly understands Benjamin's 'aura' as atmosphere, albeit in a theoretically undifferentiated form, and locates it within his overall therapeutic programme to develop an expanded conception of aesthetics that overturns the Kantian schema and returns it instead to Baumgarten. While Böhme advances his idea of atmosphere with a view to a recovery of the totality of the body and its senses for aesthetic theory, this paper questions to what extent atmospheric experience in fact turns out to be in concert with environments that strategically limit or restrain sensory experience, often in ways that participate in the kind of assumed hierarchy of the senses that Böhme wants to reject. And here the museum, an institution that Susan Stewart has described as an 'elaborately ritualized practice of refraining from touch', seems a particularly interesting example, not least in the way it emerges as one of the sites within modernity in which the structure of ritual auratic art, as theorised by Benjamin, comes to be re-performed. The paper concludes by reflecting on some of the anxieties that attend distance—social alienation and estrangement from objects—and examines two cases in which atmospheric manipulation is solicited in an attempt to overcome it.

## Staging atmospheres

In 2008 the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, known for his influential work on aesthetics—to which he makes the concept of 'atmosphere' central—gave a paper at the 'Creating an Atmosphere' conference that took place in Grenoble,

France, under the auspices of the Ambiances research network and CRESSON (Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain).<sup>1</sup> As the title 'The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres' indicates, this presented the design of theatrical settings

as an exemplary case of the production of atmospheres. The specific choice of the stage set that Böhme makes is a loaded one, and inevitably raises a number of questions that deserve some reflection, not least with regard to the manipulative or ideological aspects of designed atmospheres that the example seems to bring to the fore. In the course of his discussion Böhme touches briefly on the design and marketing of commodities, insofar as they are calculated to induce a feeling or mood that, in its affect upon the consumer, is convergent with commercial interests. Yet at the same time Böhme identifies atmosphere with the ancient term *parousia*, understood as ‘the felt presence of something or someone in space ... Thus, for Aristotle, light is the *parousia* of fire’.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these examples are made, at least in the context of the conference paper, to sit in a continuum, yet they seem very different in kind given that the latter—the light emitted from fire—is not a culturally produced phenomenon and remains independent of intention and interest. This is a distinction that the paper, in part through the naturalising parallel, tends to occlude. What is at stake in this fault line is significant, not least at a time when we have seen such escalation in what has become known as ‘affective labour’, labour that is constrained to produce what are, in Böhme’s sense, atmospheres.<sup>3</sup> Thus—to take one example—a recent commentary on wages in high street coffee chains notes how staff are required to enact a continuous positivity, a ‘performance of relentless enthusiasm’, that is as much a commercial object as are the foodstuffs themselves, by displaying characteristics of the

sort enumerated on the Pret A Manger website as ‘Pret Behaviours’. Employees’ ability (and presumably willingness) to do this is overseen by a system of monitoring, and bonuses given or withheld accordingly.<sup>4</sup>

Equally, the selection of the stage set as paradigm seems to raise issues for Böhme’s suggestion that the conception of atmospheres he develops can allow us to recover an aesthetics that takes full account of the multi-modality of sensory experience and is no longer beholden to the hierarchy of senses inscribed within the juridically-orientated Kantian schema. While certainly it is possible, and even necessary, to describe a theatrical performance as an immersive condition that engages the sensorium in an expansive way, at the same time it is hard not to feel that, if taken as a paradigm, the example of the stage set re-inscribes the hierarchy that Böhme seeks to overcome, given that the roles of the proximate senses of touch and taste—but also smell—are so obviously and strategically constrained (strategically because to touch the stage flat is precisely to display its artifice and deflate its atmospheric effects). Indeed Böhme’s choice of example suggests that the emergence of atmosphere might have something to do with the delimitation of tactile proximity, that distance might even be its precondition, an idea that returns us to Walter Benjamin’s theory of the aura.

Benjamin’s concept is an important and acknowledged precursor for Böhme, although the criterion of distance, fundamental for Benjamin, seems to disappear in Böhme’s account. Museums thus come to the fore as particularly interesting *topoi* through which to explore this question, given that they are

constituted in multiple ways through conditions of distance (historical, cultural, social, tactile, etc.). Moreover, if atmosphere emanates from or exists within distance, then we might expect to find historical instances in which atmospheric manipulation, the development of the 'right kind' of atmosphere, is imagined as a way of reintegrating what lies estranged, whether the gap in question opens between people (alienated social relationships) or between people and objects (as in the encounter with the museum artefact). Two representative examples of this kind are discussed in the closing section of this essay.

### **Becoming atmospheric**

In its role as, in Donna Haraway's words, a 'time machine'—whether that is imagined as transporting the spectator to an originary point or as stabilising artefacts against the depredations of time and thus conveying them, within an encapsulated eternal present, into the future—the museum has long been an institution that is deeply invested in the production and regulation of atmospheres, which have both a technical and affective dimension (controlling humidity, temperature, chemical and organic airborne pollutants, etc., but also the conditions and modes of display).<sup>5</sup> And thus—although this lies beyond the concerns of the present essay—one might suppose the museum to be a particularly revealing site through which to think about the relations between the poetics, politics and technologies of atmosphere, and more specifically the intersections and interdependencies between cultural and technical atmospheric manifestations and the question of representation. This would entail explor-

ing the connections that link the two senses of atmosphere, which are often dissociated from one another: namely atmosphere as the gaseous medium within which entities are enveloped; and atmosphere as the mood evoked by a particular situation, the result of manifold sensory stimuli of which we might be individually unconscious yet that together shape feeling and perception.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly it is notable the extent to which, in everyday speech, museums are often characterised as being atmospheric environments, with some—such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, or the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston—frequently cited as exemplary in this regard. A recent report on the Boston museum, based on a survey of young people's responses to it, notes that visitors stressed above all its atmosphere, which in turn they linked to the domesticity of the setting and the special organisation of the collection and environmental qualities that flow from this.<sup>7</sup> This begs the question of when—in broader terms—something becomes 'atmospheric'; of what marks a situation in which the ethereal condition that the term connotes condenses to such an extent and becomes so thing-like, and even animate, that we say we could feel or touch the atmosphere, or even that it was the latter that gripped us.

Is it the case that we are always within an affecting atmosphere of some kind, which forms a context and in some sense even a capacity for action, but that we are predisposed to attach the term only to certain feelings that are understood generically as being 'atmospheric' (in which case the term comes

to mind when environments invoke particular moods that are pre-coded as atmospheric: cosy, chilling and suchlike)? Or, on the other hand, should we argue that what we describe as atmosphere is not constant, but arises somewhere and under certain conditions, so that it makes sense to speak of it 'beginning', as—for example—Mark Wigley implies when he writes that 'Atmosphere seems to start precisely where ... construction stops' (an idea that in turn seems possible, as we shall see, to trace back to the notion of atmosphere—and indeed aura—as precisely that which exceeds the raw facticity of the artefact or the artwork).<sup>8</sup>

While it does not help us adjudicate between these two possibilities, we find a good example of the notion that atmosphere 'begins' somewhere—but also that the sense of this beginning is tied to emergence of very specific kinds of feeling—in a study of the placing and effects of ethnic objects in US domestic settings by Bodil Birkebæk Olesen. Based on interviews with 'white middle-class women' in New York, Chicago and San Francisco who purchased ethnic artefacts for their homes, her study examined the agency of those objects in their ability to conjure '... a phenomenon referred to as atmosphere, ambience or sometimes air ...', where atmosphere was identified with domestic 'coziness' and situated in opposition to public and commercial environments.<sup>9</sup>

As Olesen reports, the power of these things when positioned in the domestic setting was to imbue it with a quality that was not coterminous with the artefact itself, or even identical with its attributes, but that instead, in its interaction with the constellation of other objects present, seemed to

diffuse throughout the interior: 'The nature of such atmosphere was rather indeterminate and seemed to somewhat hover above or beyond the material features of the environment, filling up or permeating space like a haze and embracing or comforting its occupants.'<sup>10</sup> Notably, the cases Olesen discusses seem often to do with the inflection of interiors whose material conditions are resistant—literally so, in terms of the hardness of the materials themselves, or the aesthetic demand they imply—to the accumulation of traces deposited by contact (a 'modern style' interior of 'steel and glass'; a narrow white corridor that had 'zero atmosphere').<sup>11</sup>

Discussing a 1989 study by the anthropologist Grant McCracken, Olesen draws a distinction between 'atmosphere' and the feeling of 'homeyness' that formed the subject of McCracken's paper. Where McCracken's argument emphasised the perception of indexical traces of social life as signs of dwelling, Olesen argues that her '... informants' understanding of atmosphere designated instead interiors in which dwelling arose from the sensation of space as animated, a sensation that seemed suggestive of—or similar to—the animation created by the very unfolding of social life itself.<sup>12</sup> Although it is not referred to in her paper, the distinction that Olesen sets up here, on one side of which we find graspable trace and on the other diffuse atmosphere, re-enacts Walter Benjamin's opposition of trace to aura: 'The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in

the aura, it takes possession of us.’<sup>13</sup> Equally, Olesen’s suggestion that the atmospheric interior is one that, although previously inert, has become lively, vivified through the agency of objects, recalls Benjamin’s comment in his discussion of the anti-atmospheric art of Charles Baudelaire that the ‘... experience of the aura ... rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man ...’.<sup>14</sup>

### An atmospheric aesthetics?

Gernot Böhme’s influential conceptualisation of atmospheres takes place within a programme that sees a theory of atmosphere as central to a newly expanded understanding of aesthetics—or rather one that returns to it the breadth of meaning evident in the first modern use of the term in Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750): ‘Aesthetics as Aisthetics, as a general theory of perception’.<sup>15</sup> Conceived by Böhme as responding to the ‘progressive aestheticization of reality’—which is to say the widening and intensifying mediation of the world through processes of design, whereby things are intentionally staged to solicit particular responses on the part of the person who experiences them—atmospheres are understood as the primary object of perception of this new aesthetics, that which, Böhme writes, ‘... is first and immediately perceived ...’.<sup>16</sup>

In his account Böhme notes how, in everyday speech, atmospheres are characteristically not locatable in any straightforward way. Instead, they are somehow ‘in the air’, above and beyond objects, and spatially indeterminate. At the same time, however, they are perceived to have very specific

and identifiable characters (warm, solemn, joyful, friendly, intimate, melancholic, serene, etc.), which suggests their proximity to the tradition of physiognomics.<sup>17</sup> Thus they, Böhme writes, ‘... seem to fill the space with a certain tone or feeling like a haze’.<sup>18</sup> Atmospheres are then, as he defines them, ‘... spaces insofar as they are “tintured” through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations ...’, and are experienced as ‘... suggestive instances, as a tendency or urge toward a particular mood’.<sup>19</sup> The perception of atmosphere in its condition as something that surrounds us, within which we are immersed, and that even ‘... takes possession of us like an alien power’, engages our full sensory capacities in relation to the totality of the phenomena before us.

Thus for Böhme an atmospherically based aesthetics, in the wake of the ocular-centrality of the Kantian tradition, takes on a reparative status. Moreover, as ‘intermediate’ phenomena, atmospheres seem to instantiate a meeting-point of subject and object, in which the dichotomy dissolves in what Böhme describes as ‘... the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived’.<sup>20</sup> Entailed in this is a reconceptualisation of the object, which is now thought not in terms of its closure and delimitation, but rather in terms of its ecstatic ability to spread beyond itself. Böhme comments that while it may not seem unusual to speak of colour, smell or sound in this way, this must be extended to considerations of what have been called ‘primary qualities’, such as form: ‘The form of a thing, however, also exerts an external effect. It radiates as it were into the environment, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions

and suggestions of movement.<sup>21</sup> Indeed perception, insofar as it is the '... affective impression by atmospheres...', tends to become re-oriented from specific objects toward the effects that they emit. And thus, to take one example, Böhme's valorisation in his discussion of acoustic atmospheres of 'listening as such' as opposed to 'listening to something', a tendency that he approvingly sees supported by the technological detachment of sound from its source object and by modern electronic techniques of sampling, composition and acoustic installation.

[T]he characteristic feature of voices, tones, sounds is that they can be separated from their sources, or rather they detach themselves, fill the space and wander through it much in the manner of objects. Perceiving acoustic phenomena in this way, that is, as themselves, rather than as expressions of something, demands a change of attitude. We, the citizens of the twentieth century, have, perhaps as a direct result of using acoustic mechanisms, especially through headphone listening, begun to practice this attitude.<sup>22</sup>

As noted at the outset, the paradigm that Böhme advances as a form of aesthetic production dedicated to atmospherics is that of the theatrical stage set, and this he links in turn to the *phantastike techne* discussed and reprimanded in Plato's *Sophist* for its departure from the model in favour of the impression produced in the mind of the beholder (changes to proportions to correct statues optically from certain viewing positions, etc.) This is the principle of a scenography, then, whereby the concern for the object *per se* is superseded by its moulding in view of the impression that it is

intended to make upon its observer. Thus Böhme comments that scenography '... does not want to shape objects, but rather to create phenomena. The manipulation of objects serves only to establish conditions in which these phenomena can emerge.'<sup>23</sup>

For Böhme, stage design testifies to the 'quasi-objective' nature of atmospherics given that it shows how a particular mood can be stimulated for an audience, by the design and arrangement of objects that constitute the setting, together with the control of the environmental conditions (light, sound, etc.) within which they are made to appear. This mood will inevitably be proleptic and I suppose this offers one way of thinking about the peculiar atmospherics of house-museums, such as the Gardner museum in Boston upon which I have already remarked, in which the artefacts are both participants in, and are mediated by, a domestic setting held in suspension. Important to the sense of heightened atmosphere here, surely, is exactly that quality of arrested-ness that imbues it with the anticipatory character of the stage set, the sense of a space of imminence, in which something is always about to happen.

### Atmosphere/aura

The theory of museum display developed by the cultural studies scholar Gottfried Korff provides us with a way of articulating the question of atmosphere with that of the institutional conditions of the museum. Rehearsing the positions of Hermann Lübke (the museum as a compensation device that attempts to counteract the '"temporal identity diffusion" of modern societies', the loss of cultural conti-

nuity wrought by incessant change) and Peter Sloterdijk (the museum as a 'school of estrangement', a 'xenological institution', whose task is to present difference), Korff finds in them a common point: namely, the idea of the museum as 'a place where one encounters the unfamiliar ...'<sup>24</sup> The museum, as he puts it, 'facilitates a brokering service as it regulates the distance between the experience of the visitors and the displayed objects or documented cultures', a distance that may be manifested not only in temporal, but also in cultural, social, etc., terms.<sup>25</sup> The fact that, in its mediating role, the museum thus emerges through the interplay of near and far, leads Korff to refer to Walter Benjamin's theory of aura, which—as we have already registered—is thought in terms of a condition of distance-in-proximity.<sup>26</sup> The logic of this argument inevitably positions museum artefacts as auratic objects or, in Sloterdijk's characterisation, 'weakly radioactive materials'.

The affiliation between, and even identity of, aura and atmosphere is clear. Benjamin himself articulated it in his writing on Baudelaire, while Böhme has noted that 'aura is something which flows forth spatially, almost something like a breath or haze—precisely an atmosphere'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed aura for Böhme stands as a term for 'atmosphere-as-such', an encompassing category awaiting further differentiation.<sup>28</sup> In his account of aura as set out in his 'Artwork' essay, Benjamin had famously referred to natural phenomena: 'What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that

casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.'<sup>29</sup> In Benjamin's formulation the aura might flow from the thing, but the source of its radiation resides in a depth that must remain unapproachable.<sup>30</sup>

In his commentary on Benjamin's formulation, Theodor Adorno described the aura as that which allows an artwork to escape its 'factual reality'<sup>31</sup>, as the '... more of the phenomenon [that] announces itself in opposition to this phenomenon'.<sup>32</sup> As such, it stands against any attempt to submit the artwork purely to the concept as its principal determination, but also—through its registration of what is beyond the grasp of the viewer—against any form of identity-thinking that would seek to conjure away the unassimilable alterity of the phenomenon. Thus, reflecting on Benjamin's passage on the aura of natural objects, Adorno proposes that the formulation marks what must exceed—and protest against—the instrumentalisation of things. Benjamin's account of the aura, he writes, '... is a rudimentary model of the distancing of natural objects—as potential means—from practical aims'.<sup>33</sup> Adorno analogises the aura to radio atmospherics, the 'crackling noise' through which the 'more of the phenomenon' is announced, an allusion reminiscent of Benjamin's 'mystery of dust motes playing in sunlight', itself suggestive of a certain materialisation of the aura as an exhalation of things that are withdrawn from us.<sup>34</sup>

### Ocular-centrism and distance

While Böhme advances his idea of atmosphere with a view to a therapeutic recovery of the totality of the body and its senses and an expanded (or recovered)



understanding of aesthetics, the emphasis that Benjamin places upon distance must lead us to wonder to what extent atmospheric experience in fact turns out to be in concert with environments that strategically limit or restrain sensory experience, often in ways that participate in the kind of assumed hierarchy of the senses that Böhme wants to reject. We already see something of this in the latter's promotion of the 'stage set' as a paradigm for the production of atmospheres; and this consequently raises the idea that what we have been describing as museum atmospheres may be intimately related to—and in a sense dependent upon—the ocular-centrality of the museum as an institution, at least as it has developed since the Enlightenment. In describing museums as 'empires of sight',<sup>35</sup> Susan Stewart has linked their development to a Western hierarchy of the senses, which she traces from Aristotle to Kant and beyond. Here the privilege accorded to vision, and the corresponding denigration of the proximate senses of touch and taste, leads to—as she puts it—'... a subjectivity separated from nature, protected by mediation, and propelled by a desire born out of the very estranged relation thus created'.<sup>36</sup>

Studies of the historical development of relationships between museum objects and audiences have described an increasing distillation of the encounter with the museum object into a condition of pure opticality, a process that reflected both the ascendance of the visual in aesthetic and epistemological discourses, but also the disciplinary construction of museum audiences and of the institution itself as a place of edification, marked off from sites of display as popular entertainment, such as side

shows and fairgrounds. Thus the museum as institution emerged, Stewart writes, as '... an elaborately ritualized practice of refraining from touch', in which objects are 'shown forth'.<sup>37</sup> According to Constance Classen and David Howes, this process culminated in the mid-nineteenth century, a suggestion echoed by Samuel Alberti in his study of collections of natural history and anatomy: '... Victorian collections were gradually removed from tactile range. The use of formal vitrines increased, standardizing museum displays and distancing the observer from the specimen. The objects were reified, rendered sacrosanct. They also became more mysterious ...'.<sup>38</sup>

The effects of distanciation wrought by the ocular paradigm of the museum and its related technologies of display (encapsulation under glass, modes of lighting, etc.), which illuminated the artefact whilst shielding it from any tactile immediacy, thus emerges as one of the sites within modernity in which the structure of ritual auratic art, at least as it is formulated by Benjamin in his 'Artwork' essay, comes to be re-performed. Predicated upon relations of contemplation and distance (and hence non-tactility, in accord with the idea of touch as profanation), this is famously counter-posed in Benjamin's essay to technologically facilitated modes of interaction with things that grasp them and bring them close. Thus, to recall one example, Benjamin distinguishes the distanced, auratic practice of the magician–healer from that of the surgeon, whose instruments penetrate into the body of the sufferer.<sup>39</sup>

### **Atmospheric reintegrations**

If atmosphere ramifies within distance, if it is the thing whose role is always to extend between or

to surround other things, then it inevitably appears as the fundamental and ineluctable terrestrial medium, that which carries the emissions of objects and through which they must pass.<sup>40</sup> As such, the experience of atmosphere will inevitably entail questions of the experience of distance, such as those we have been exploring through Benjamin, but perhaps also the peculiar anxieties that are attendant upon it, whether they be spatial, emotional or epistemological. Distance, as I have been suggesting, may be the precondition for the emergence of atmosphere, but the relationship between the two has been thought of in very different ways. On one hand, as haunted air, atmosphere has been the classic site of ontological uncertainty, a shifting space of hallucinatory appearances, of phantasms, imaginings and dissimulation. Thus Thomas Aquinas speculated that it was by moulding the air that the Devil, himself without a physical body, might fashion himself an apparent one, or that—by enveloping other beings in manipulated air—might confer a false form upon them.<sup>41</sup> The particular veridical status that touch has in the Western tradition, of putting one's finger upon something, becomes grounded in its status as a point of immediacy that evacuates everything airy and literally substantialises the visions conveyed to the eyes.

Yet on the other hand, as medium, and more specifically as the medium within which we are immersed as a collectivity and which we internalise through respiration, atmosphere can seem to be the agency that promises distance's overcoming and hence spatial connection. When the writer Lion Feuchtwanger visited Moscow in 1937 he

characterised what he saw as its vital collective morale in this way, figuring the air as a unifying *pneuma* or spirit: 'The air which one breathes in the West is stale and foul. In the Western civilization there is no longer clarity and resolution ... One breathes again when one comes ... into the invigorating atmosphere of the Soviet Union.'<sup>42</sup> And although articulated in a different way, this sense of the connective potential of atmosphere is equally present, as we have seen, in Böhme's characterisation of it in relation to what he describes as the 'ecstasies' of things, whereby they go outward from themselves, taking leave of their formal limits in such a way as to generate spatial ambiances.<sup>43</sup>

Given this, it is not surprising that attempts to overcome distance have often concerned themselves with atmosphere, motivated by the utopic dream that, through its renovation or remediation, what is broken, disparate or estranged might be reintegrated.<sup>44</sup> If atmosphere can be thought of as a totality within which we are immersed and thus potentially unified, then becoming-whole might crucially involve getting it right. So the glasshouse-like Phalansteries of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, which housed his ideal community knit together through forces of 'passionate attraction', emerged as anticipations of his vision of remediating the atmosphere of the planet through the melting of the polar ice: a kind of divinely-ordained act of geo-engineering that would, he insisted, inaugurate a new epoch of harmony. A similar preoccupation is evident in the debate that developed around how Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace should be used following the closure of the 1851 Great Exhibition. It was a building that had from the start been itself

characterised as an atmospheric phenomenon: William Whewell described it as appearing to 'rise out of the ground like an exhalation', while Lothar Bucher, a German exile resident in London, reported that as the building receded into the distance 'all materiality is blended into the atmosphere'.<sup>45</sup>

In her remarkable study of nineteenth-century glass culture, *Victorian Glassworlds*, Isobel Armstrong has examined the politics of the urban conservatory. Closely affiliated to botanical glasshouses, with their connotations of nurture, its microclimate promised pleasure and regeneration amidst the exotica assembled within it. Thus she writes that the early Pantheon Arcade (1832) in London by Sydney Smirke, which contained tropical birds, fish, Moorish statues and suchlike, urbanised and commercialised the principle of the conservatory as Winter Garden: in it '... historical times and tropical spaces converge[d] under glass, simultaneously transcendentalizing purchase and promising transformation in a new world of pleasure'.<sup>46</sup> Against this background, Armstrong explicates the opposed glasshouse ideologies of Joseph Paxton and John Claudius Loudon, the landscape gardener, republican, and follower of Jeremy Bentham. In her telling, the preoccupation of the royalist Paxton, Head Gardener at Chatsworth, was with the conservatory as a space of mass visual consumption, a unified scopic field within which time and space collapsed in extraordinary spectacle, exemplified by his own virtuosic cultivation and display of the massive water-lily *Victoria Regia*. For Loudon, however, the import of the conservatory, its promise as a non-hierarchical, egalitarian-democratic space, was not as a topos of scopic, but rather of meteorological—or

perhaps even pneumatic—unification. As Armstrong writes: 'A truly civic achievement, it [was] the epitome of the humanly made transformative space of nurture. It [was] literally a breathing space, a place for therapy, respiration, and creative reverie ...'.<sup>47</sup>

In July, 1851, the Benthamite journal *The Westminster Review*, with which Loudon was associated, published a long polemical essay that advocated a very particular future for the Crystal Palace. Characterising it as '... a great metropolitan Conservatory, or winter garden ...',<sup>48</sup> the article argued that it heralded a future of emancipated social relationships, in which the full potential of each individual might be realised. Thus the Palace heralded '... what will be possible in wintry lands, when progressive human cultivation shall have obviated the necessity of guarding against acts of violence or of unjust appropriation'.<sup>49</sup> For our author, however—as we might anticipate from the reference to 'wintry lands'—this future turned out to be less founded in and enabled by Benthamite transparency, whether material or social, than in a new meteorological condition in which free and un-alienated social relationships would be recovered and would flourish in remediated air.

Consequently, in its utopic condition as metropolitan conservatory, the future of the Exhibition Hall could not lie with commerce. Instead, the article concluded, it should become a 'metropolitan college' for those 'original minded men' on whose activities national progress depends. Such individuals are, the author emphasised, '... the reverse of accumulative'. 'They discover and give continually, to all mankind, whether in philosophy, literature,

art, chemistry, or mechanics.<sup>50</sup> It was as if the renovation of atmosphere was the necessary prelude to social renovation, whereby everything restricted, locked up, frozen and distanced by the profit motive became thawed and put into free circulation, as free—indeed—as the air itself. Remediation through the technology of glass architecture opened onto the return of a dreamt-of pre-technological state: ‘The groves of Academus might be revived ... Socrates and Plato might reappear.’<sup>51</sup>

As for the museum, Korff’s notion of it as providing a ‘brokering service’, which regulates distance, gives us a vantage point on another of our anxieties of distance, namely that of the gap that exists between the museum artefact and its observer. Modern curatorial approaches that seek to reduce this, typically through strategies of immersion, might be said—at least from the perspective that we have developed—to aim at the moderation of the atmospherics that emanate from the alterity of the objects themselves through the manipulation of the larger atmospheric conditions within which they are situated. A striking example of this is the Hall of the Pacific Peoples developed in honour of the anthropologist Margaret Mead and opened in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York in 1971. Mead’s stated objective in the design of the hall was to ‘... heighten and purify the encounter between object and observer through the reduction in the number of design elements that interfered with this communication’.<sup>52</sup> This was hardly a case, however, of the purging of ‘design elements’ in order to do away with any kind of stagecraft or mediation of the encounter. Instead, it had more to do with a redirec-

tion of design, which now took as its object the generalised atmospherics of the space in order to construct an ambience—through a new kind of intensified technological mediation—which was intended, however paradoxically, to foster the visitor’s impression of immediacy.

This would involve, as Mead wrote in her 1960 document *Outline Plans of Ideas to be Emphasized and Cultures to be Included*, the stimulation of impressions of islands and sea ‘... with a feeling of lightness and distance, and the occasional density of the deep bush’, and the sounds of the sea ‘in all its moods’.<sup>53</sup> Practically this involved devices such as a diffusive lighting rig intended to reproduce the specific character of shaded tropical sunlight and a terrazzo floor of oceanic turquoise.<sup>54</sup> Visitors found themselves within a space that attempted to realise an encapsulated ambience, a set-up indebted to earlier modes of display developed at the AMNH, in particular the habitat or life groups, themselves derived from the tradition of dioramas and *tableaux vivants*. In her study of the habitat group exhibits in the AMNH’s African Hall, Donna Haraway linked the effects of these taxidermic displays to a realist aesthetics and epistemology, in which the work of culture was to efface its own trace from the artefact, such that ‘... what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if one will look’.<sup>55</sup> The result was less an impression of representation than of displacement, the magical appearance of immediacy within the museum. As James Clark wrote in an official publication from 1936 on the Hall, ‘Transplanted Africa stands before [the visitor] ...’.<sup>56</sup>

Mead's aim to 'purify the encounter' between visitor and artefact echoed the representational agenda earlier declared by the then AMNH president Henry Fairfield Osborn, who, in a 1911 article entitled 'The Museum of the Future', wrote that 'In the development of our halls there is the constant effort to shut out the human artificial element, to bring the visitor directly under the spell of Nature ...'.<sup>57</sup> The development of the habitat groups was directly in the service of this idea, and extended also into the construction of life groups of human settlements. Thus, commenting on an Inuit exhibit at the AMNH, five years before Osborn's article, Sherman Langdon had reported that 'Here all at once we are in the very atmosphere of an Indian encampment or an Eskimo village.'<sup>58</sup>

Mead herself had worked on life groups for the museum as early as the beginning of the 1930s, starting with a Manus village that was apparently one of the first small-scale groups, and she subsequently arranged for this, together with other miniatures, to be displayed within the new Hall. These were shown below what Mead described as specially constructed removable domes, which hinted perhaps at nothing so much as little captive atmospheres. If the exhibitionary strategy of the Hall of the Pacific Peoples was to dissolve conditions of distance through atmospheric technologies, then the first thing to disappear was necessarily the transparent membrane that had hitherto separated the visitor from the display, positioning her on the outside looking in. In the new Hall the visitor was, as it were, to step into the habitat itself, a habitat that was no longer spatially locatable but that was rather diffused throughout the exhibition area in a

panoply of atmospheric effects. To paraphrase Diane Losch, the horizon had disappeared and the gallery had become an environment<sup>59</sup>—which is equally to say, looking back to the theatrical paradigm of Gernot Böhme with which we began, that the habitat group stage had expanded in order to interpellate, incorporate and absorb its audience.

## Notes and references

1. <http://www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMBIANCE2008-communications.htm> [accessed 06/12/13]; <http://www.cresson.archi.fr/default.html> [accessed 06/12/13].
2. Gernot Böhme, 'The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres', p. 8: <http://www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMB8-confGBohme-eng.pdf> [accessed 02/05/13].
3. 'Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion.': Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, London, 2006), p. 108.
4. '... the company maintains a panoptical regime of surveillance and assessment. Not only do workers watch each other, chivvying, cajoling, competing, high-fiving; they are also watched. Mystery shoppers visit every branch of Pret A Manger every week. If their reports are positive—more than 80 per cent of them are—the entire staff gets a bonus that week. Workers cited for "going the extra mile" get a further £50 in cash, which they have to distribute among their colleagues. But if the mystery shopper happens to be served by someone momentarily off their game, who may be named and shamed in the report, no one gets rewarded. The bonus is significant, £1 per hour for the week's work, upping the starting salary of £6.25 (just higher than the UK minimum

- wage of £6.19) by 16 per cent.': Paul Myerscough, 'Short Cuts', *London Review of Books*, 35(1) (3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2013), p. 25.
5. Haraway is referring to the African Hall at the American Museum of Natural History: Donna Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936', in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London and New York, Verso, 1992), pp. 26–59; 59.
  6. Here I am paraphrasing Steven Connor's description of an 'auditory unconscious', which he posits as a counterpart of Walter Benjamin's 'optical unconscious', '...constituted of everything that ordinarily fell upon the ear without being recognised or registered, but which nevertheless shaped feeling and perception': Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal* (London, Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 198.
  7. 'When asked about the most enjoyable aspect of the visit, most interviewees named something related to the environment or atmosphere of the Museum. Most spoke generally of enjoying the ambience, atmosphere or feeling of the Museum, and several named the architecture, lighting, and/or general noise as something they enjoyed': Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., *Audience Research: Young Adult Study, Prepared for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Mass.* (July, 2008), p. vi; <http://www.gardnermuseum.org/education/research/reports> [accessed 26/04/13].
  8. Mark Wigley, 'The Architecture of Atmosphere', *Daidalos*, 68 (1998), pp. 18–27; 18. See also Hubert Damisch, 'Blotting Out Architecture? A Fable in Seven Parts', *LOG: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City*, 1 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 9–26.
  9. Bodil Birkebæk Olesen, 'Ethnic Objects in Domestic Interiors: Space, Atmosphere and the Making of Home', *Home Cultures*, 7(1) (March, 2010), pp. 26–41; 29, 33.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
  11. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 31.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
  13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., London, Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 447 [M16 a, 4].
  14. Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in, Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London, Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 152–196; 184.
  15. Gernot Böhme, 'Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics', *Soundscape: the Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, 1(1) (2000), pp. 14–18; 15.
  16. Gernot Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics', *Thesis Eleven*, 36 (1993), pp. 113–126; 125. 'In general, it can be said that atmospheres are involved whenever something is being staged, wherever design is a factor—and that now means: almost everywhere': Gernot Böhme, 'The Art of the Stage Set', *op. cit.*, p. 2.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
  18. G. Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept', *op. cit.*, p. 114.
  19. G. Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept', *op. cit.*, p. 121; 'Acoustic Atmospheres', *op. cit.*, p. 15.
  20. G. Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept', *op. cit.*, p. 122.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
  22. G. Böhme, 'Acoustic Atmospheres', *op. cit.*, p. 17.
  23. G. Böhme, 'The Art of the Stage Set', *op. cit.*, p. 6.
  24. Gottfried Korff, 'Reflections on the Museum', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 36 (2/3) (1999), pp. 267–270; 269.

25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 268–269.
27. G. Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept', *op. cit.*, p. 117.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
29. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (Second Version), in *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–38* (Cambridge, Mass., London, The Belknap Press, 2002), pp. 102–133; 104–105.
30. 'The essentially distant is the inapproachable... ', W. Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', *op. cit.*, p. 184.
31. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, Athlone Press, 1999), p. 274.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
34. W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 103 [D1a, 3].
35. Susan Stewart, 'Prologue: From the Museum of Touch', in, Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, Jeremy Aynsley, *Material Memories* (Oxford, New York, Berg, 1999), pp. 17–36; 28.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
38. Constance Classen, David Howes, 'The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts', in, Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gordon, Ruth B. Phillips, eds, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford, New York, Berg, 2006), pp. 199–222; Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, 'The Museum Affect: Visiting Collections of Anatomy and Natural History', in, Aileen Fyfe, Bernard Lightman, eds, *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (Chicago, London, University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 371–403; 385.
39. W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', *op. cit.*, pp. 115–116.
40. An earlier version of this final section was published under the title 'Atmosphere and Distance' in the *Journal of Architectural Education*, 67(2) (2013), pp. 283–284.
41. Caroline Oates, 'Metamorphosis and Lycanthropy in Franche-Comté, 1521–1643', in, Michel Feher, ed., with Ramona Naddaff, Nadia Tadzi, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One* (New York, Zone, 1989), pp. 305–363; 318.
42. Lion Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (New York, Viking Press, 1937), pp. 149–150.
43. G. Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept', *op. cit.*, pp. 120–122; 'The Art of the Stage Set', *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.
44. See Mark Dorrian, 'Utopia on Ice', *Cabinet: A Quarterly of Art and Culture*, 47 (2012), pp. 25–32.
45. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 142, 152.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
48. 'Art. IV—Official Catalogues of the Industrial Exhibition. Spicer and Co., 29 New Bridge-street, Blackfriars', *Westminster Review*, 55 (July, 1951), pp. 178–204; 179.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
52. Diane Losch, 'The Fate of the Senses in Ethnographic Modernity: The Margaret Mead Hall of the Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History', in, E. Edwards, C. Gordon, R. B. Phillips, eds, *Sensible Objects*, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–244; 236.
53. *Ibid.*: cited in p. 232.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 236–7.
55. D. Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy' *op. cit.*, p. 38.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 38: citing James Clark, 'The Image of Africa', in *The Complete Book of Africa Hall* (New York, American Museum of Natural History, 1936), p. 73.
57. Henry Fairfield Osborn, 'The Museum of the Future', *American Museum Journal*, 11(7) (November, 1911), p. 224: cited in, Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York, Columbia University, 2002) p. 9.
58. Sherman Langdon, 'The New Museum Idea', *World's Work*, 12(3) (July, 1906), p. 7711; cited in A. Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
59. D. Losch, 'The Fate of the Senses in Ethnographic Modernity', p. 241.