

# CONSTRUCTING ATMOSPHERES

TEST SITES FOR AN AESTHETICS OF JOY

Margit Br  nner



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This book deals with my research into atmospheres and the spatial nature of joy. What started off more than a decade ago as an investigation into how places condition emotional responses keeps evolving as an inquiry in an ever-transforming subject. Above all the book gives an account of my arts-practice and provides a theoretical framework for the production of a joyful consequence.

Most of the works I refer to in this book are part of a research-project that has been undertaken at Oratunga, a 75 square kilometre pastoral property in the outback of South Australia. However, it is premised on a series of preceding projects I executed in Austria and Australia.

I thank the ARTS AND CULTURE DIVISION OF THE FEDERAL CHANCELLERY OF AUSTRIA, for their recurring openhanded financial support, which has been invaluable to my research into atmospheres. My sincere gratitude to PROF. BERNHARD LEITNER for encouragement at a time when I didn't have the words for the subject of my inquiry and to PROF. HANS HOLLEIN whose appreciation for experimentation, allied with a relentless demand for conceptual rigor, sparked off this work. Over the years many people lent their expertise to the work; my special thanks go to IRMI PEER, REGINA RAMSEL, and HEIDE KINZELHOFFER – I feel privileged, you offered both friendship and enthusiasm; to STEFANIE, JONNY, PAUL and NICOLE, for their inspiring friendship and collegiality.

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Before becoming a book, *Constructing Atmospheres – Test-sites for an Aesthetics of Joy*, was a PhD thesis entitled, *Becoming Joy: Experimental Constructions of Atmospheres*, completed at the University of South Australia in 2012. I owe special thanks to my publisher DR. ROCHUS HINKEL and to DR. HÉLÈNE FRICHOT for her exquisite editorial input, generosity, and her ongoing enthusiasm for my work. A big thank you to DR. PEG RAWES for tailoring a superb preface and to PROF. GERNOT BÖHME, for his kind recommendation.

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# PREFACE

## 'BRISK UP JOY'

Peg Rawes

Margit Brünner's poetic travels through buildings, cities and outback land show us how life is composed of incremental, fleeting and imaginative states of joyous transience. A figure disappears out of a window, sleeps with suitcase on the public steps of a cultural centre, lies head-first into a yellow dust-grass landscape, or stands as a speck of colour within the visual field. Figures of disappearance perhaps, but for Brünner these are atmospheric compositions of 'what a body can do'.

Weaving images of performative wanderings - her 'joy-lines' - with vocabularies of 'natural' and 'imaginative' geometries that are retrieved from the philosophical writings of Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson, Brünner summons a practice that is composed of a plenitude of bodily, environmental, urban, ad-hoc and quotidian singularities. Like the grains of sand which shift under the body that begins the story - a modern day geometrico ordinaire - the body is always situated within a mobile 'atmosphere' of material change: light, vegetation, weather, urbanism and the visual vocabulary of the performer are co-constituted to form a relational set of spaces, habits and rhythms.

Spinoza's term 'expression' applies here since the body and her geometry of inhabitation is drawn out through photograph, line, pen, ink and paint. But it also applies to the ontological capacity of performance to show the incremental constructions of the body in its setting: for Brünner these are necessarily relations in which human and non-human substance express the duration of a specific subject or singularity. Such encounters are therefore ecological patterns located within the overlooked and everyday natures and poetics of place-making. Veering away from the notion that geometric principles of space-making can only ever be understood as an axiomatic procedure, Brünner's body-images (after Bergson) are non-teleological episodes. These event-drawings draw our attention to the internal imaginative and material integrity of a composition, which we might interpret as hidden stories of political and cultural signification that form the non-places of so much of our realms of inhabitation, especially in the built environment. But, given the internal logic of expression that flows through her work, these 'minor geometries' are much more accurately understood to be composed of the natural rhythms and speeds of change that, for Brünner, constitute worlds of atmospheric inhabitation.

Dust, specks, minute scales of interference and pattern: geometries that are not aggrandised into formal 'bodies of knowledge', but are different scales of 'sense-reason' which also describe ways of knowing, ways of 'meeting the world', and notable for their capacity to operationalize the lightness of joy. Small, ephemeral and insignificant detail is envisioned as a plenitude of qualities. Consequently, what we find in this book is a practice that accords with a Spinozistic understanding that joy registers as a fleeting moment of change or differentiation, unlike the urgent directional impulse or repetitive intensity of pursuits of pleasure that modern drives of desire tend towards. Instead, in these *durée*, *potentia* is not sublimated, but constitutes a vocabulary of body-atmospherics which express an ontology of processual life.

These life-worlds, *umwelts* and atmospheric habitations are then rhythmic geometries of what the body can do. Geometric parallelism is shifted into an expressive language in which the resonance between the body and its environment is prioritised, and which enable images of life to pass through. Like Gordon Matta Clark's 'energy-form' drawings from 1964, their ontology is composed of possibility, rather than complete exhibition.

Brünner's drawing out of life along stepping stones and lines of intuition reminds us that, even though we don't live in a time of seventeenth-century divine metaphysics of 'God-as-nature', it is possible to be reminded that passing conjunctions between the body and twenty-first century urbanism or 'non-human' land can be atmospheric sites of joy.



# INTRODUCTION

## 1. SUMMARY

*Constructing Atmospheres - test sites for an aesthetics of joy* is a book that is informed by a practice-led research project consisting of an exegesis and a series of art works. It is concerned with the exploration of the affective character and the potential of specific sites, and how these are synonymous with the construction of 'selves' that emerge in relation to them. The intention of this research is to closely examine the complex interplay between specific environments and myself, through a visual arts-practice. The term 'atmosphere' is a principal subject of this exploration and has complex meanings that are discussed and unfolded throughout the book. To test the hypothesis of joy as specified in the philosophical concepts of Baruch Spinoza and carried forward by Gilles Deleuze in particular, the inquiry is centred on the development of art works that bring forth states of joy in relation to environmental circumstances.

The philosophical discussion that is embedded in the activity of 'manoeuvring atmospheres'<sup>1</sup> in a theoretical, interdisciplinary framework must of necessity be fragmentary, as it consults thinkers and practitioners from different fields of knowledge. It includes Jacques Rancière's theories of aesthetics and the scientific concepts of David Bohm and Rupert Sheldrake, and the religious thinking of Hinduism and Buddhist traditions. In addition to Spinoza, I have drawn on philosophical concepts from Henri Bergson, and as a consequence on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, well known for their work on Spinoza and Bergson. These thinkers assisted me in challenging the still dominant and mainly materialistic concepts of spatial reality. Investigating the topic from within the visual arts, the work has been informed by the practice of John Cage, and it is sympathetic to the art work of Roman Signer, and, as a result of the research, corresponds with the thinking of Joseph Beuys, specifically with his concept of social sculpture.<sup>2</sup>

At its heart, this book addresses the production of collective spaces, suggesting that the processes of atmospheric exploration - inevitably involving psychological self-survey - are concrete spatial productions. Using experiential methodologies, it emphasises 'practical spatial intervening' and centres on visual translations of emotional and psychological 'affect' into 'atmospheres'. I propose that the exploration into atmospheres through visual practices constitutes a refinement of the social collective fabric and may contribute positively to the quality of public space. It aims at empirically verifying and manoeuvring the philosophical concept of an 'atmospheric reality', namely that of an interdependently shared collective nature, through explorative experiments. These find expression in performative, art-based drawing, as well as in ordinary daily practices that are equally important. By attuning to a state of being that is invested with joy,<sup>3</sup> this book critically examines the ethical aspect of my art practice, which addresses strategies for more sensitive ways of engaging with(in) specific physical environments.<sup>4</sup>

The art works and discussions collected here can be located across urban and rural conditions and unfolds in relation to a routine I developed of shifting between the small Australian city of Adelaide and Oratunga, a pastoral property in the Flinders Ranges. This also enabled me to compare responses to the different atmospheres encountered and produced across different sites. Challenging an habitual belief in the distinct, visible and material boundaries between bodies in practice, the development of art works aimed to provoke significant shifts in perception capable of producing the experience of being-atmospheres, a being which I suggest is synonymous with joy. To represent the construction of joy – as being essentially a non-representable and, in the first instance, an internal activity – by visual means, was and continues to be the prime challenge of my creative research.

As a record of the visual experiments undertaken the writing summarises my related experiential insights. A high state of attention is required to get at what is experienced as atmospherically real,<sup>5</sup> and inevitable inconsistencies emerge in the process of writing up the unrepresentable aspects of atmospheres in order to make them somehow available to a reader. Consequently I can only offer a limited depiction of atmospheres.

## 2. CREATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the experiencing subject resonate with and within a place?  
Or, How are affecting and being affected mutually operating between site and self?
2. How does one attain an ‘atmospheric state’ as a precondition to explore the issue of the reciprocal exchange between affecting and being affected?<sup>6</sup>
3. How does one navigate as atmosphere within atmospheres; that is, how does one orientate oneself in a world of resonances as distinct from a world of objects?<sup>7</sup>
4. How can I ‘follow’ the processes of resonance and can they ever really be ‘represented’ through a visual arts practice?

---

1 I provide a ‘taste’ of atmospheres in A note on atmospheres, p. 22.

2 How my concept of atmospheres corresponds to Joseph Beuys’ Social Sculpture is discussed in section 5.5.3 Zivile Übungen, p. 208.

3 The same applies for joy as for atmospheres, because they are intrinsically linked to each other. Likewise complex, joy and its conditions are discussed in detail throughout subsequent Chapters, especially in Chapter 3, Climates of joy, p. 87.

4 I inquired into environments located at Oratunga in the Flinders Ranges and in Adelaide. Oratunga is a 75 square kilometre pastoral property in the Flinders Ranges high country of South Australia and also the site of Dr. Virginia Lee’s curatorial practice known as “*The Oratunga Project*”. See in particular section 5.2 Oratungas gifts, p. 173.

5 I discuss this state later in this writing as The Spinozist, in Chapter 3, Climates of joy, p. 87.

6 The term ‘atmospheric state’ refers to a series of states of awareness that are described in detail in Chapter 3, 3.4 Atmospheric perception: intuition in practice, p. 108.

### 3. WRITING ATMOSPHERES

My writing reflects the structure of the inquiry as a passage between two concepts of spatial reality examined through arts-practice. As an abstract inquiry I am concerned with a transformation proceeding from 'identity via subjectivity in process' towards a free state of existence.<sup>8</sup> Practically, however, this movement is fragmentary, complex and confusing, and comprises sub- and parallel movements, backwards and forwards movements, shifts, interruptions, and blind alleys. This confusion, arising from direct inquiry, is reflected in this writing exactly because the writing results from and accompanies the artistic practice.

The present text is written by a native German speaker, who discovered pleasure in collecting new English words, filtering meaning back and forth between languages, again and again, to build up sentences and sufficient sense. Because of my initially un-skilled English I commenced by writing like a blind person, moving forward by tapping along the contours of structures, at times finding myself in peculiar places. I still cannot be completely assured about the preciseness of a sentence or whether it carries additional associations; I lack unlimited access to the English language. Consequently, parts of this book may still appear to be strange, and I politely ask the reader to bear this in mind whilst reading. On top of this I have invented a small number of words, neologisms, retaining (and finding joy in) my own logic of language, between languages. From time to time there is evidence in the writing of this language not being my first language, which potentially has the effect of evoking an atmosphere of a third language - or a coming into 'view' of the tone of both languages at once.

### 4. A BACKGROUND

The emphasis upon open-ended experimentation reflects personal values connected with my insights into the relation between architecture, site and emotional or psychological atmosphere.<sup>9</sup> These insights are based on my previous studies and background in the study of architecture and are part of what has led me to move from architecture into visual art practice.<sup>10</sup> My architectural studies led me to engage in a sustained enquiry into the invisible and transient factors that influence the individual character or atmosphere of specific architectural and urban spaces. From this point of departure I began to engage deeply with the nature of architectural space itself, including the role played by the human body within space. I discovered entirely different notions of space within the disciplines of visual art, dance, music, philosophy and science. My encounters with such diverse sources have led me to view space as not only developing from 'restricted coverings', but as an 'occurrence' that emerges from the present moment.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, after completing my studies in Architecture, I commenced what I termed a 'practical exploration' of the perceived atmospheric characters of specific public spaces, examining how atmospheres might relate to concrete forms, which directed me to further question my professional engagement as an architect.<sup>12</sup> I also came to recognise this practical exploration as being an experimental spatial practice<sup>13</sup> connected with contemporary visual arts and correlated with new ideas in art theory and aesthetics.

- 
- 7 Resonance in physics is explained as a tendency of a system to oscillate with larger amplitudes at some frequencies than at others. These are known as the system's resonant frequencies and occur with an input of energy. At these frequencies, even small periodic driving forces can produce large amplitude oscillations, because the system stores vibrational energy. Forced vibration may cause the escalation of some frequencies causing the system to collapse. Resonances occur when a system is able to store and easily transfer energy. Niklas Luhman introduced this term in his *soziologische Systemtheorie*.
- 8 Identity, understood as the personal characteristics or personality of somebody. In consequence 'subjectivity', that is linked with identity and understood as the personal attitude of conceiving the world, undergoes a modification, turning towards a temporal, perhaps even random, perspective. I will expand on the term 'identity' in relation to freedom in Chapter 2, Spinoza's geometry, p. 69.
- 9 See Glossary, p. 224.
- 10 I studied architecture with Prof. Hans Hollein at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Practicing as a designing architect for several offices, whilst studying and thereafter, I got more insight into the daily challenges of this profession. It took not long to be disenchanted by the limited amount of time, the architects I worked for could economically afford to allocate to the design-process, I realised how difficult it is to retain a visionary position, if one wants to build. Meanwhile it is obvious that it is the visionary position that demands the extra effort, regardless of the kind of discipline one is involved in.
- 11 Franz Xaver Baier, *Raum: Prolegomena zu einer Architektur des gelebten Raums*, ed. Posthofen Christian, Vol. 2 (Köln: Verlag Walter König, 1996). Baier's book differentiates 44 types of spaces, e.g. erratic, panic, stretched, to name a few, all referring to space as lived medium.
- 12 During my studies in architecture I realised that the visual appearance of an architectural space and its subjective felt qualities do not necessarily correspond to each other, which I summarized in my final project by designing a residence for, and partly with, the blind musician Otto Lechner. The final year project only touched upon something, I felt, worth exploring more deeply, because 'atmospheres' still appeared to be a phenomenon I neither understood nor felt competent in having developed suitable tools for its creation. Hence, right after my Masters I started to invest in an experimental exploration of the atmospheres at the Viennese railway station and the St Stephen's cathedral as opposing 'atmospheres'. I conducted this research project named *moving space surprises*, which was funded by the Austrian government, over nine months.
- 13 From 2002 onwards, until I commenced my PhD in 2007, I followed this practical exploration of atmospheres by four further research projects, *cosmetHic space refinements*, *Strategies to investigate atmosphere*, *the Lizards travel-approaching nomadic space*, *Damen in Körpern*, all of which were funded by the Austrian government. Emphasising different aspects, they dealt with locating, visualising, and mapping atmospheres of various specific public places, including the Docklands in Melbourne, diverse locations in Melbourne City, urban areas and squares in Vienna City, such as Maria am Gesteade, or the Donaukanal, the Viennese woods and urban outskirts like the Platte at the Danube river, and landscapes such as Brachina Gorge, in the Flinders Ranges, Lake Mungo, and Broome.

The provisional conclusions I reached were: 1. By demonstrating our ethics and values, the spatial environments we create also express the kinds of norms and assumptions that underlie collective social behaviour and its cultural expressions; and 2. A purely materialistic understanding of space may lead to an emotional distancing from the environment, contributing to the social and ecological problems that currently prevail on a global scale; and finally 3. the central question “how do atmospheres relate to concrete forms?” emerged.

Teilhard de Chardin defines the real<sup>14</sup> as a particular type of universal synthesis. He speaks of “spirit - matter” as the physical molecular structure of the universe and points out that pure spirituality is as inconceivable as pure materiality. He uses “Noosphere”, the Greek term for spirit, for a stage of spiritual and intellectual development wherein humanity would be able to conceive of being one spirit. He stresses that the risk of a new point of view is a risk that must be taken, and argues that the inability to experience the universal whole originates in our insistence on narrow concepts of individuality.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of such speculations, I suggest that a rethinking of the relationship between the subjective ‘I’<sup>16</sup> and the collective conscious flow of humanity is a precondition for being able to realise the possibility of joy, by which I mean all that pertains to the positive enhancement of life affirming values, within individual life – and further, may have a lot to do with the quality of the environment within which s/he exists and vice versa. The Worldwatch Institute states that:

The consumer culture has spread around the world, with more than two billion people now considered to be part of the global consumer class. This cultural system encourages people to define their happiness and success through how much they consume. But on a finite planet, this system is maladaptive and threatens to cause significant disruptions to Earth's climate and ecosystems, and subsequently to human civilization. If we do not shift to a new cultural norm in the coming decades, achieving a sustainable society will remain out of reach.<sup>17</sup>

I propose, in accordance with the Worldwatch Institute's view, that to liberate happiness from its commercial value and retrieve joy within being may lead to more creative and satisfactory ways of living. Indeed, I suspect that to prioritise joy (without and because of reason) over other aims may in fact contribute to the development of a more ethically and ecologically sustainable society.<sup>18</sup> In the course of the research project that has led to this book my awareness of the relations between my own perception of a circumstance and the very circumstance itself can become uncomfortably clear. Theoretically aware of the fact that importune circumstances are not only imposed, but erroneously co-produced, the practical exploration of atmospheres has ‘peu à peu’ presented me with hidden relations between ‘my systems’ and a supposedly ‘larger system’.<sup>19</sup>