

# Exhibition as Atmosphere

The first time I saw it, pounding the hilltop houses and sweeping across the valley between us, it took my breath away. And then I panicked. This is The Airborne Toxic Event, from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and it's approaching fast. I stopped thinking and watched as it swelled and broke and crashed and took half of the magnificent Sutro Tower away, only to give it back as it roiled toward me. I could feel the cold coming, a damp, marine cold at odds with the bright and warm sunshine overhead. The vista was now gone.

San Francisco's summer fog is like nothing I've ever known, and if you haven't seen and felt it, you can't possibly know what I mean. Wildly unpredictable, the fog doesn't announce when it will hit, where, how, for how long, or what it will be like when it lingers. Sometimes the fog comes in through the Golden Gate, a gentle caterpillar wafting toward the bay. Sometimes it crashes over the city's western hills, an avalanche, or sits above them like an impromptu mountain range, or swallows the northern neighborhoods, taking the streets away one by one until the city becomes (as it did one late June evening this year, the night my friend from Montreal wore ski gloves and a hat) something that is best described as nuclear winter.

San Francisco's fog has many, many different qualities and characters. Sadly we have only two minor literary representations – the "little cat feet" of Carl Sandburg and the "coldest winter" wrongly attributed to Mark Twain – to describe something of nearly infinite chromatic variation (every shade of gray, white, even purple, and sometimes black), not to mention the protean ways it morphs and moves and chills, creating the city's famous microclimates, which, in turn, affect real estate values . . . but I digress. The fog may offer a nearly perfect example of the sublime, an aesthetic experience of nature that summons the pleasure in overcoming fear. Some of us call the fog "the evil one," but we love its tricks and know that, however fierce it may appear, it will ultimately drift, burn off, and vanish into thin air.

There is one point I wish to make about fog here. The point is, simply, that fog is one thing when it is an object and quite another when it is an atmosphere. When you see the fog,

over there, however still or swift it may be, it is an object, something to apprehend, observe, enjoy, or fear at a distance. As it approaches and eventually overtakes the place you are in, it becomes an atmosphere. An atmosphere that is palpable, undeniable, and collective in nature. The fog, when it surrounds, is your atmosphere. Our atmosphere. And suddenly, whether you are looking or not, you are in it and it affects you considerably. You are now in an ether, a soup, a gunk of cool or cold damp. All is whiter, grayer, lower than it was. Slower too. Things you could see in the distance – mountains, landmarks, the sun, other points of reference – are gone. Often you can discern the edge of the ceiling – imagine you are inside a soup pot and the lid is slightly cocked – and over there, which could be a few blocks away (although, more often, across the bay), it is bright, sunny, warm, and clear and the people there are in an entirely different atmosphere; you are in the fog and they are in California.

#### ARRANGING OBJECTS

An exhibition, most would agree, is concerned with objects and their arrangement. While this rule, too, has plenty of exceptions, it remains the dominant practice, and a well-codified one at that. Museums collect objects, which are stored for future exhibitions. Curators select these objects and borrow and commission others to make exhibitions, which are then supplemented, in the conventional way of thinking, with devices to produce the visitor or viewer experience. These can include scenographic elements – lighting, wall color, signage, furniture, and so on – as well as interpretive tools, such as text and multimedia devices.

Yet objects are the heart of the matter. Their conservation needs determine light and climate levels in the galleries as well as the presence of vitrines, frames, security cameras, guards, and other forms of protection. Their representational strategies, more often than not, determine the degree to which signage and interpretive elements (all of which might also be imagined as visual materials) are brought to bear. There are objects – works of art – on display, and around and about them is the rest, including the gallery space and features already mentioned; these latter elements are, emphatically, not on display. They are merely the frame, the container, the tool for presenting objects in ways that assure their significance and affirm their status.

The rise of the white wall and “cube” attests to the fantasy of a spatial apparatus that vanishes. Various transformations in museological practice, such as the development of

traveling exhibitions that require similar galleries, pull toward the neutering of exhibition space. To a considerable degree, modern art has consolidated its identity by imagining its autonomy from architecture. Only the most myopic of viewers can credibly assert that he or she only sees a painting or photograph with no relation to its surroundings. An exhibition, after all, is not a slide show; it takes place in space. And that space, which will soon acquire some characteristics, is something I would like to call atmosphere.

#### ARCHITECTURE AS OBJECT

You might have expected otherwise. Yet when architecture entered the modern museum as a medium to collect and exhibit, it was precisely its capacity to produce atmosphere (or space, broadly considered) that was lost. This is the deal, it would seem, Philip Johnson made as founding curator of modern architecture. The architectural projects he selected for “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” (which, incidentally, travelled to 13 other venues in under two years) were represented by models and photographs and identified by the individuals associated with their creation. Rather than situating architecture in its social and political contexts, Johnson (who transformed early modernism into an “international style”) noted in the exhibition press release that “the most important architects of the world have designed models of the type of building best suited to their individual genius.”

In this and many other ways, architectural projects were sublimated to conventions of exhibiting art in order to enter the modern museum. These modernist objects must have seemed at odds with the Beaux-Arts galleries they occupied. Yet their assimilation was complete, or nearly so, as Johnson placed the models on tablecloth-covered bases, as if small sculptures, and instructed the installation crew “to hang the photographs as if paintings.” From this moment forward, architecture was welcome in the museum gallery so long as it agreed to these, or similar, representational conventions and declined, quite simply, to be architecture.

The history of architecture exhibitions in the modern and contemporary periods has not yet been written. Instead, we are left to imagine a kind of inevitability about the conventions that govern how architecture takes place in a gallery. There are, of course, numerous strategies that have developed over the years, some of them exciting and transformative, and I am currently developing an extended study of these strategies and the ways they address the problem of architectural space as an object of display. In the roughly 80

years since Johnson's breakthrough, architecture exhibitions have reached beyond models, drawings, and photographs to include presentations of entire buildings, research-based installations, media spaces, collaborations with artists, performances, and other efforts to resituate architecture in the museum and to communicate architectural priorities and provocations to the public. Yet the dialogue between art and architecture in a museum is not often framed as such, as a site of (wonderfully irreconcilable) difference and the kinds of productive, unpredictable results it can produce. The potential for a rich and richly animated dialogue between art and architecture in museums remains a fertile, compelling terrain for research.

#### ATMOSPHERE

The atmosphere of an exhibition includes works of art, to be sure; we can even admit they are the main event. But it really does include everything else, and is not limited to these: the architecture of the gallery; lighting and decor; furniture; interpretive elements; the activity and comportment of people, including security guards and other visitors; the ideas and affects that fill the air; the museological, curatorial, and artistic practices that discursively support the objects; the interpretive practices that support the activity of the viewers, and so forth. Smells and sounds, too. The atmosphere of an exhibition is, simply, its vibe. It is something to be felt and inhabited, not only seen, and it can be remembered.

In a compelling exhibition, this air, this atmosphere, is charged and vibrant, even vital. By contrast, in situations where one feels gallery fatigue or overload, the atmosphere may be too thin, lacking in life or the equivalent of oxygen. For some of us, this atmosphere matters a great deal, maybe more than the objects themselves, whose meanings and even auratic qualities can only be referenced with respect to all the rest. I am reminded here of Roland Barthes's thoughts on the "cinematic situation," which reframed the moving image by bringing into focus the dark and social space of film viewing.

In this way of thinking, which I understand to be fundamentally architectural, one of the tasks of a curator is to produce atmosphere. This is something I have tried to do again and again with exhibitions; a few examples will suffice here. Consider my first show, in 1998, an exhibition at the Gramercy Art Fair in New York that presented architectural thought where it didn't belong. Each gallery was assigned a hotel room; most treated the room as an insufficiently neutral space, with walls that weren't white enough and furniture that

got in the way. My approach (which I might now call proto-atmospheric) was to treat the hotel room as a hotel room and assemble works by nine architects that probed the enigmatic, quasi-domestic and quasi-public, qualities of this site.

In subsequent exhibitions I have explored different ways of confronting the space of the gallery – its form, program, and normative meanings – with other possibilities. These include projects that staged activities not associated with display, such as LOT-EK's "TV-TANK," which positioned a lounge for watching television (and, not incidentally, a place for people to take naps) inside a commercial gallery. Or Freecell's "Moistscape," which offered a kind of interior garden in the gallery one hot summer. Infused with cool, damp air it allowed four kinds of moss to grow along a galvanized steel armature; visitors were invited to stand or sit on a soft, fragrant floor of shredded rubber, where some people would unpack a lunch or something to drink. Or "In Heat" by Jürgen Mayer H., the gallery's final exhibition, which treated the space as a three-dimensional surface and encouraged visitors to touch areas covered with heat-sensitive pigment, marking their visit as an ephemeral trace. This project paid hommage to Frederick Kiesler's "Blood Flames" exhibition of 1947, and Kiesler would surely be among the historical figures to trace toward a genealogy of exhibition as atmosphere.

At SFMOMA I have endeavored to give each exhibition a spatial character that is distinct, memorable, and atmospheric. Here I will mention but one for its particular capacity to elucidate a relationship between object and atmosphere. We presented Olafur Eliasson's *Your mobile expectations* in 2007, a BMW "art car" that, unlike others, did not approach the problem as one of redecorating the car or treating its surface as a canvas. Instead, Eliasson removed the chassis of the hydrogen-powered H<sub>2</sub>R race car and replaced it with a new skin of steel and ice; this was the object on display, the main event, as it were. In order to house it, however, we had to build an 800-square-foot walk-in freezer, and this is where I want to focus our attention. Viewers encountered a big box that nearly filled the gallery, turned the corner to gather fleece blankets, and waited in line to enter in small, expedition-like groups. Once inside, people found themselves in an extremely cold space, about 10° F, that was also very brightly lit and acoustically alive. Wrapped in gray fleece, protected and somehow abstracted, like clerics, visitors huddled around the sculpture, suffused from below in a yellow-orange light that suggested a source of warmth. I enjoyed watching people surprised by what we had offered them; many had never

experienced such cold before! And it was this atmosphere, I dare say, that lingered: a rich stew of intellectual, affective, and corporeal experiences provoked by, but not limited to, the sculpture on view.

#### FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE

Atmospheric exhibitions envelop their viewers, who are now as much participants as observers or viewers, in spaces of particular qualities. They have, in this sense, the capacity to create collective experience, however temporary, among their visitors. How different this is from traditional concepts of the exhibition and its ways of addressing the individual viewer. This perfect couple – object and viewer – is exactly what the atmospheric exhibition can challenge as it offers an expanded field for encountering objects and others.

We crave distinct spaces and especially the space of richly textured social experience. This is something the contemporary museum is well-positioned to provide although, beholden to objects, it can hesitate to do. The history of modern and contemporary exhibitions offers significant counterexamples and it must be stated clearly that I see my own work operating in a discourse to which I owe a great deal: John Dewey's ideas on "art as experience" and their manifestation in the galleries of the Barnes Foundation; Philip Ursprung's exhibition "Herzog & de Meuron: Archaeology of the Mind" at the Canadian Centre for Architecture; Lina Bo Bardi's inaugural exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Art; Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*; *Big Bambu* by Mike and Doug Starn atop the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Kiesler; Duchamp. There are, to be sure, many texts and exhibitions to cite, exhibitions with atmosphere, with the feeling of something palpable, something present and vibrant in the air, exhibitions that bring people together in ways that matter.

Consider Peter Sloterdijk's recent writings on atmosphere and democracy. Sloterdijk has been developing a theory of democratic participation that seeks to identify the discursive spaces that gather and link people. His writings refer to ancient Greek theories of the *polis* among other, more architectural concepts such as the well-tempered air of 19th-century English palm courts. Truly public space, in his account, is immersive space; it transforms individuals into people who can imagine collective experience. Atmosphere, then, is what makes democratic life possible.

What if we posited the exhibition as a saturated space of collective, and collectivizing, experience? What if we recognize that this is fundamentally architectural – a framework

for experience – and propose atmosphere as a mode of exhibiting architecture? How might we see things differently if exhibitions were directed toward producing a kind of intimacy among strangers? Might such a shift be meaningful as our mediated culture accelerates the privatization of public experience? Might the exhibition be, in this sense, an interruption in the smooth functioning of neoliberal ideology and a site for the production of collectivity itself?

We float in the clouds. It is a stormy summer afternoon and the clouds are unusually tall, thick, and bulbous. The plane bounces forward, shaking and rattling, and we all feel uneasy. But of course it's completely fine; we're just passing through different atmospheres, spaces of other qualities. And, with that in mind, we can navigate and know what each has to offer, and those that come after too.

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