

*The Cabinet of [Atmospheric] Curiosities.  
A journey in search of the origins and logic  
of atmospheric practice*

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# THE CABINET OF [ATMOSPHERIC] CURIOSITIES

A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGINS  
AND LOGIC OF ATMOSPHERIC PRACTICE

IZABELA WIECZOREK

Curiosity not only denotes a desire for discovering something new, but, as suggested by Michel Foucault, is ‘a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now, and what is disappearing.’<sup>1</sup> Drawing from the fascination with curiosities cabinets – historically seen as a means of classifying and communicating knowledge through a collection of disparate artefacts – *The Cabinet*

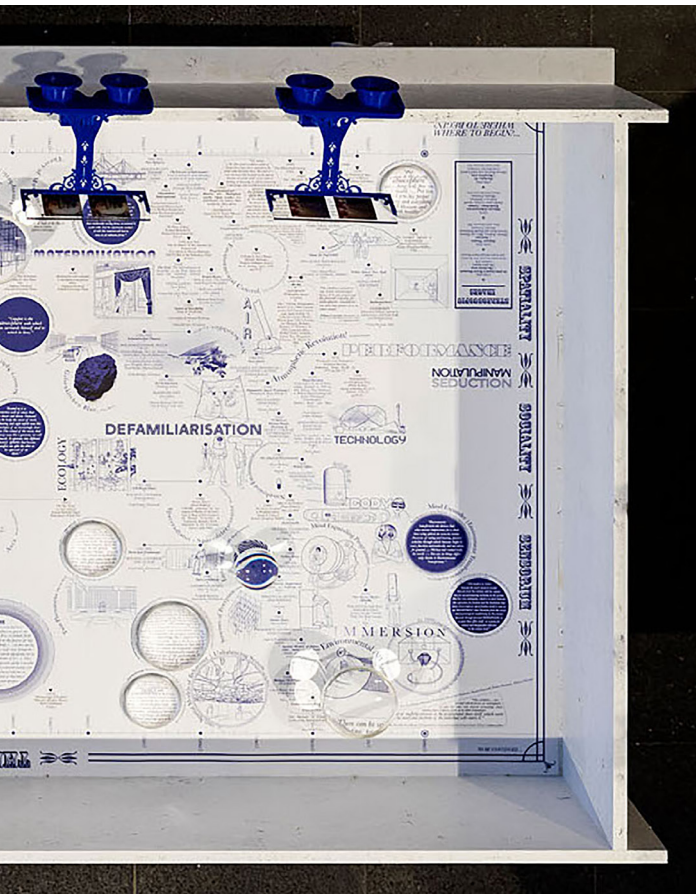
*of [Atmospheric] Curiosities* not only represents the urge to systemise the constantly evolving knowledge on spatial atmospheres, but also to reveal a rarely discussed history of atmospheric practice. It is a place where canonical works of atmospheric ‘staging’ and engineering – some overlooked, some never realised, and those that have been lost – are re-visited, re-constructed, or re-enacted.<sup>2</sup> Chronologically arranged heterogeneous atmospheric *specimens* constitute a visual survey



featuring key reference and contextual information, conveying the multiple meanings of the notion of atmosphere and highlighting the significant role of the selected examples in the construction of atmospheric imagination. In doing so, *The Cabinet* becomes a tool for mapping the *immaterial land* of forgotten knowledge, tracing new and, at times, unexpected relationships between works written, built or imagined in the past, and the contemporary theories of atmosphere.

Often associated with the discovery of ‘new worlds’, cabinets of curiosities transcend, however, a mere accumulation of material evidence.<sup>3</sup> Similar to map making, cabinets of curiosities are grounded in knowledge construction, allowing for an exploration of their imaginative potential. Following such a logic, *The Cabinet* lies somewhere between indexing and speculation, a dialectical device and a generative instrument. Not only does it chart multiple ways in which atmospheres have been theorised and materialised, translating historical data into a visual medium, but it also engages with the development of new tools, methods, and creative processes that define ‘an active engineer of atmosphere’ – to borrow Jean Baudrillard’s definition.<sup>4</sup> Its documentary nature is subverted by a creative *inhabitation* of the studied works, which are approached as territories for experimentation and invention. *The*

2,4

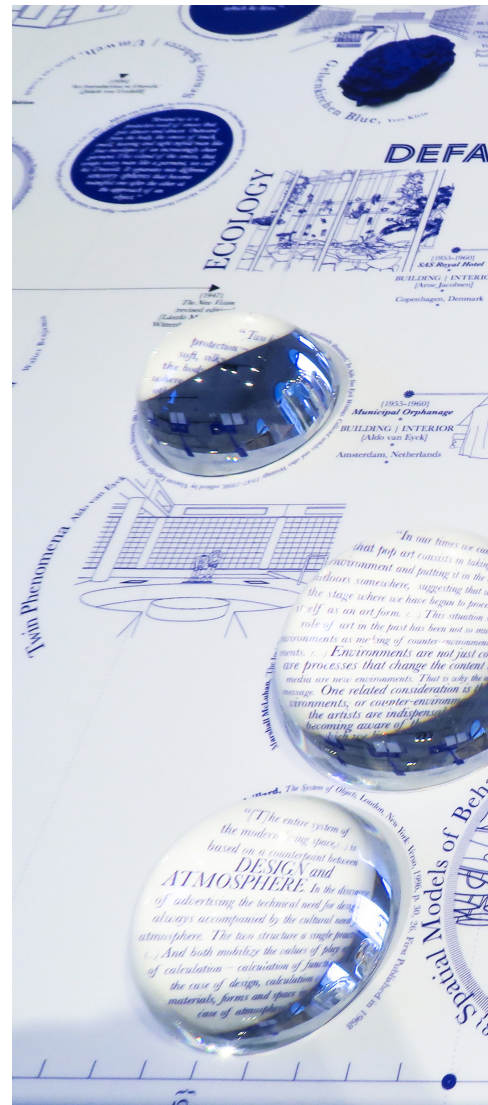


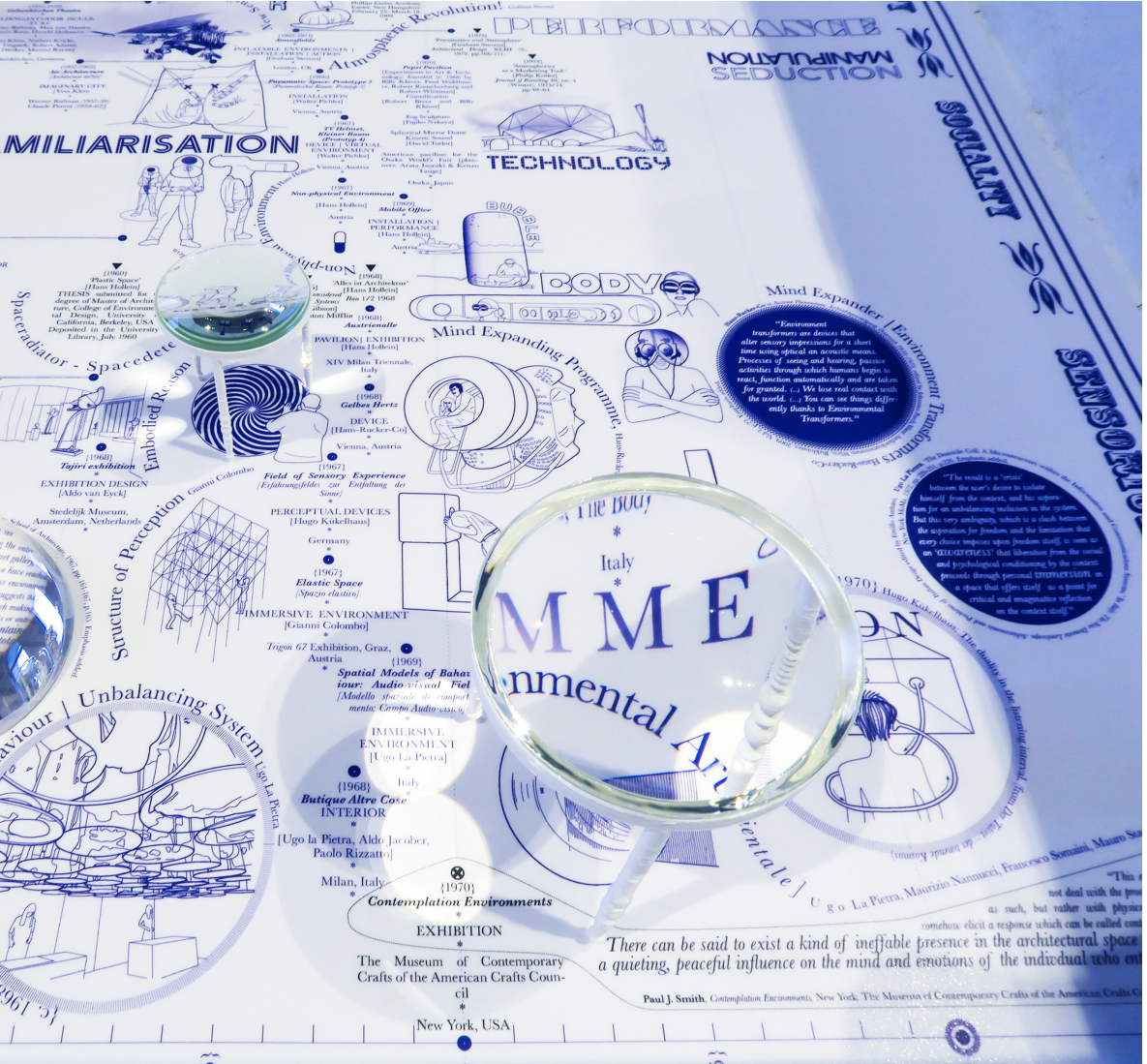
2,5



*Cabinet* becomes, therefore, a site where histories and imaginary scenarios co-exist and overlap, establishing multidirectional dialogues. Words, drawings, models, images, and objects constitute an assemblage of both material and discursive traces, revealing the link between the analysis of theories and ideas and the exploration of conditions, actions, constituents, techniques, materials, forms, and processes underlying the production of atmospheres.

Similar to the cabinets of curiosities of earlier times, this hybrid map is not conceived as a static tableau but an immersive device defining a liminal domain wherein both transmission of knowledge and atmospheric experience can take place. In fact, the transmission of knowledge is staged as an atmospheric event. A series of optical instruments activate different areas of *The Cabinet*, producing ‘perceptual, imaginative and intellectual intensification’ and choreographing a network of possible relationships.<sup>5</sup> While a series of lenses – alluding to nautical chart magnifiers – bring intimacy between the exhibited *specimens* and the observer, stereoscopic viewers transform images into three-dimensional scenes providing almost palpable experience of places. Both aim to stimulate an embodied process of attentive reading, encouraging an inquisitive journey in search of the origins and logic of atmospheric practice.





**MILIARISATION**

**Space-radiator - Spacedete**  
Embellished Revision  
EXHIBITION DESIGN  
[Aldo van Eyck]  
Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam, Netherlands

**Unbalancing System**  
[Ugo La Pietra]

**Atmospheric Revolution!**  
Non-physical Environment  
[Hans Hollein]  
[1969]  
Austria

**PERCEPTIVE DEVICES**  
[Hugo Kubelhaus]  
Germany  
[1968]  
Italy  
**Elastic Space**  
[Spazio elastico]  
[Gianni Colombo]  
[1967]

**IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENT**  
[Ugo La Pietra]  
[1968]  
Italy  
**Butique Altre Cose**  
INTERIOR  
[Ugo La Pietra, Aldo Jacoboer,  
Paolo Rizzatti]  
[1968]  
Milan, Italy

**Contemplation Environments**  
EXHIBITION  
The Museum of Contemporary  
Crafts of the American Crafts Council  
New York, USA  
[1970]

**TECHNOLOGY**

**BODY**

**Mind Expanding Program**  
[Hans Hollein]  
[1968]  
Austria

**PERFORMANCE**

**Environment  
Transformers**  
"Environment  
transformers are devices that  
alter sensory impressions for a short  
time using optical or acoustic means.  
Processes of seeing and hearing, tactile  
activities through which humans begin to  
react, function automatically and are taken  
for granted. (...) We lose real contact with  
the world. (...) You can see things differently  
thanks to Environmental  
Transformers."

"The result is a 'tension'  
between the user's desire to isolate  
himself from the context, and the system  
for an unbalancing inclusion in the system.  
But this very ambiguity, which is a clash between  
the aspiration for freedom and the limitation that  
every choice imposes upon freedom itself, is seen as  
an 'ALLEGORY'S' dual dimension from the mental  
and psychological conditioning by the context  
present through personal EXPERIENCE in  
a space that offers itself as a point for  
critical and imaginative reflection  
on the context itself."

There can be said to exist a kind of ineffable presence in the architectural space  
a quieting, peaceful influence on the mind and emotions of the individual who enters  
such as, but rather with physics  
something elicit a response which can be called contemplation

Paul J. Smith, Contemplation Environments, New York: The Museum of Contemporary Crafts of the American Crafts Council