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The Aesthetics of Atmospheres. Foreword

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Foreword

Jean-Paul Thibaud

A curious paradox reflects the field of sensory atmospheres and architectural and urban ambiances. While this research domain has been growing for almost thirty years and tends increasingly to spread internationally, the seminal work of Gernot Böhme has been only partially disclosed to and published for the English-speaking public. This collection of articles intends to fill this gap by providing access of the philosophy of atmospheres developed by Gernot Böhme to a broader readership.

Gernot Böhme has gained international renown through his work on the philosophy of science and the theory of atmospheres. The present work concerns more particularly the second branch of his thought. He has devoted the past 25 years to founding and developing the idea of atmosphere, first fitting it into his ecological aesthetics of nature then thematizing it as part of his overall aesthetic. Atmosphere thus enables him to return to the prime sense of the aesthetic, in other words conceived as a theory of sensory perception.

At the beginning of the 1990s the idea of atmosphere emerged as the touchstone of Böhme's new aesthetic. His thinking constituted an essential reference in the field, initiating the new widely shared interest in the theme of atmospheres. Of course Böhme drew on the work of leading authors to back up a project on this scale, in particular Hubertus Tellenbach's conception of the oral sense, Hermann Schmitz's philosophy of the felt body, or Walter Benjamin's concept of aura. However it was the author of *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (1989), *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (1995), and *Architektur und Atmosphäre* (2006) who initiated and gave its full measure to this new field of research.

The reader will certainly recognize in Böhme's aesthetic of atmospheres the underlying filiation to *Naturphilosophie*, extended here in new and original ways. His thinking is inspired by and benefits from the new phenomenology current in German thinking and the social criticism propounded in its early days by the Frankfurt school. But we should look further, paying attention to his work on Kant's Critique of Judgement, Plato's theory of mimesis and Aristotle's Poetics. Reading very widely in philosophy Böhme established solid roots for his philosophy of atmospheres, proposing new concepts for its application. Take for instance his idea of ecstasy and the 'ecstatic' nature of things which radiates around them, or the notion of medium as the third essential term between the object perceived and the perceiving subject.

But here again his aesthetic of atmospheres cannot be seen as a purely speculative theoretical stance. It also brings into play a two-sided approach that is both critical and practical. Furthermore Böhme has repeatedly stressed the critical value of atmosphere as an idea. Rooted in history and built into forms of social life, atmospheres are a means of revealing political issues in contemporary life and taking onboard the consequences of its aestheticization. One of Böhme's recent publications – *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus* – reflects the particular importance he attaches to the political arena. Furthermore, atmospheres are

not merely a matter of reception, but also of production. Their material dimension thus opens onto the world of action, architecture and design. From this perspective atmospheres have as much to do with *aisthesis* as with *poiesis*, witness the operational power of atmosphere as an idea, and its ability to shape and take part in the world in its making.

The present collection brings together a series of articles published over the past 25 years. Reading between the lines one can see how his aesthetic of atmospheres has evolved and gained depth, much as the intertwining arguments, which respond to and enrich one another as time passes. Turning the pages we see how his thinking developed, matured and reached out. Whereas the concept of atmosphere is now widely used, almost commonplace, and certainly seems almost self-evident, this collection highlights the work and invention required to gain acceptance for the idea and develop an aesthetic standpoint of such complexity. In a way the book tells us a lot about the conditions under which the idea took shape and its history.

These texts were published in various journals, in collective works and exhibition catalogues. Written in very different contexts and addressing readers of substantially different disciplinary backgrounds, they gradually map out a huge range of questions, themes and fields covered by the idea of atmosphere. Rather than taking the articles in chronological order it seemed preferable here to regroup them by theme, giving the reader a sense of the topics of key concern to Böhme. This applies to aesthetic theory itself, with in-depth analysis of its roots and enigmas, to the aesthetic of art and nature, which opens the way for a fresh look at the question of ecology, to architecture, which reflects the operational character of atmosphere as an idea when designing and building living spaces, and the sound and light environments which affect and configure our daily experience. The limited number of inputs does not belie the great diversity of issues addressed, reaching from life in society to political economics, from the city to the body, from language to technology. One immediate lesson may be learnt from such thematic wealth, namely the cross-the-board, transversal nature of the idea of atmosphere. It operates as a remarkable sounding board, a means of analysing the contemporary sensory world, encompassing a broad spectrum of questions and experiences. The introduction written by Böhme specifically for this publication, demonstrates this very well, pinpointing the many artistic, social, political and ecological issues of present concern which can be interpreted in the light of his aesthetic of atmospheres.

The collective of the *International Ambiances Network* (www.ambiances.net) wishes to thank Gernot Böhme for his trust by providing us the opportunity to publish his book. Such an undertaking is of particular significance given the centrality of the theory of Gernot Böhme within the thematic of sensory atmospheres. By contributing to this publication, the *International Ambiances Network* continues its scientific mission and work enhancement on the subject. It reaffirms the importance of the dissemination and discussion of the essential texts of this field of thought and action, it calls for an open search for the diversity of languages, disciplines and approaches, and it implements the constitution of internationally shared knowledge in the field.

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for the *International Ambiances Network*