

WALKING IN THE PLANE OF DISAPPEARANCE

n°56 What do you know about water? When you talk about water aren't you really talking about yourself? Isn't water like the weather that way?

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Another Water: The River Thames, for Example

Walking in the Plane of Disappearance explores the materiality of images and the space where they appear. The project consists of a daily journal combining photographs and written text, and a short film. Both pieces focus on the element of water and how its physical transformation engages with the gaze, perception, and image-making.

The events recalled in the journal and the film document my month-long fellowship at the British Pavilion during the 16th Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2018, whose theme that year was FREESPACE. The British Pavilion was curated by Caruso St John Architects in collaboration with the artist Marcus Taylor. The architects and artist left the British Pavilion empty and created a platform on the roof to offer new perspectives on the sea and the Giardini. My month in Venice, from late October to the end of November, was marked by historic flooding, followed by days in thick fog that left perception in suspension. Even when the fog faded away, small low clouds kept coming back. The blurring of the limit between the sea and the sky became a reminder that water and air belong together, like our moving bodies are part of the atmosphere. Following the atmospheric pressure and the effect of the variation of water density in air, the journal records the experience of that month in Venice. The routine of invigilating an empty pavilion, moving across the banality of the work at the pavilion and the breath-taking view on the sea, gave place for a reflection on the intangible and the atmosphere of a place. All this emptiness refused to be grasped until the day the air became visible.

When water in the air reaches a specific density, our atmosphere becomes perceptible. Using literal play with the meteorological understanding of atmosphere, this project attempts to grasp what atmosphere could mean in architecture. When asked about what moves him in architecture, architect Peter Zumthor answers, "atmosphere": "something we all know about, like the first impression of a person. Which we perceive through our emotional sensibility."^[1] How do we create an "atmosphere" in architecture? What kind of impression or emotion does a "watery" atmosphere leave? What happens when, momentarily, a meteorological phenomenon makes this invisible element visible?

The philosopher Gernot Böhme distinguishes the shift in the signification of the term atmosphere from its meteorological origins to something sensed: "The term atmosphere has its origins in the meteorological field and refers to earth's envelope of air which carries the weather. It is only since the eighteenth century that it has been used metaphorically, for moods which are 'in the air,' for the emotional tinge of a space."^[2] Atmosphere become an element connecting space and emotion.^[3] In his work, Böhme demonstrates how the aesthetics of atmosphere constitute a theory of perception that "shifts attention away from the 'what' something represents, to the

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'how' something is present....Aesthetics thus becomes the study of the relations between ambient qualities and states of mind, and its particular objects consists in spaces and spatiality."^[4] If, through fog, water is the material of atmosphere, then can it also be the material of emotion?

The experience of fog allows us to perceive the meteorological atmosphere. The attention to "how" something is present also reveals how other things disappear. What do we lose when something invisible become visible? In a treatise on painting, Leonardo da Vinci introduces the idea of the perspective of disappearance to explain how perception dissolves with distance. The notion of the plane of disappearance describes what we lose as we are further away from an opaque object. First, we lose the edges, then the lustre, and what remains last after the shadow is only dull and blurred obscurity.^[5] The idea of plane of disappearance follows a section on the idea that the blue of air rises. For Leonardo da Vinci, those two phenomena of dissolution of perception relate to the density and quality of air between the observer and the perceived.

In an essay on James Turrell, Georges Didi-Huberman, discusses how a space devoid of a perceptual plane opens towards the experience of the depth of perception and its temporality. The disappearance of the plane of perception allows us to reflect on the gesture of looking into something, rather than at something.^[6] In a space where seeing takes place, what can we see when everything disappears, when the plane of perception dissolves into the air? Professor of architecture Alberto Pérez-Gómez explores the origins of the word atmosphere in *Attunement*, his book on the connections of architecture with place and people. Atmosphere in Greek, he explains, describes vapor and steam as well as breath.^[7] The reference to breath draws attention to the continuity we have with the space we occupy. Moreover, Pérez-Gómez notes that "according to Plutarch, the atmós of moving water or foggy air is capable of carrying fleeting images – like the imagination of the inner self; it can bear words like human breath."^[8] Atmosphere connects us to our surroundings. Water in suspension in the air – fog – opens the depth of the plane of perception, where perception inside the body matter as much as outside.

Part written text, part photographic text, this work explores the limits of vision and the movement of adjustment of the gaze in a blurred environment. The journal entries tell a narrative of an amorphous encounter with fog. The images create a promenade for the gaze. Through the texture, colour, and reflection, they suggest a visual continuity that invites the reader to evolve alongside the change of water density in the air. The images and the written text develop in parallel. Together, the written text and the photographs evoke the image of a place in suspension, an in-between. Like air, the traces of the images are invisible, but, for a moment, they could be carried by fog. The journal collects meteorological data, daily thoughts, images, and borrowed words in passage from novels, stories, and poems that kept me company during my fellowship in Venice.

The film uses footage taken during the stay to construct the space opened by the fog. Where, for Böhme, atmosphere can connect space to emotion, for Giuliana Bruno, scholar of visual art and media, the movement embedded in the cinematic can link space to emotion. In her work *The Atlas of Emotion*, Bruno writes, "Cinematic space moves not only through time and space or narra-

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tive development but through inner space. Film moves, and fundamentally ‘moves’ us, with this ability to render affect and, in turn, to affect.”^[9] The film pursues the questioning about the experience of images and perception initiated with the journal with the footages taken during the stay. While the journal searches for a place across the movement between images and text, the film and filmmaking extend that gesture in time. The interplay between written text and images in the journal is replaced by the layering of images in the film. While filming fog, the camera’s electronic lens could not find focus, as if the camera eye could not decide on where to settle. In all this homogenous white environment, there was no background or foreground, no scale, no depth, and no closeness or distances. The image on the camera screen kept coming into and out of focus, disintegrating and then reappearing. The film aims to enact that experience of vagueness. Composed of layered images in transparencies, the scenes oscillate between near and far, and move from one place to another. On the importance of vagueness, architect and professor of architecture Juhani Pallasmaa argues that unfocused vision allows us to comprehend the world with its multiplicity of perceptions, dreams, observations, and desires.^[10] This state of uncertainty – when vision isn’t clearly defined – invites heightened attention and opens towards a broader territory of space, time, and memory.

The use of different research mediums here aims to lead the gaze back into the experience of fog in a city floating between water and air. The research process is part of a material practice that questions the place where images appear and how they can make space present again. The experience of water is an intimate experience. The temporary blindness in fog made possible the co-existence of invisible and visible. Both pieces – the journal with its written text and images, and the film with the layering of moving images – attempt to return to the state of suspension of perception. Walking in the Plane of Disappearance is about being with the image, rather than looking at an image, in a space where the felt and perceived, distance and closeness fold into each other.

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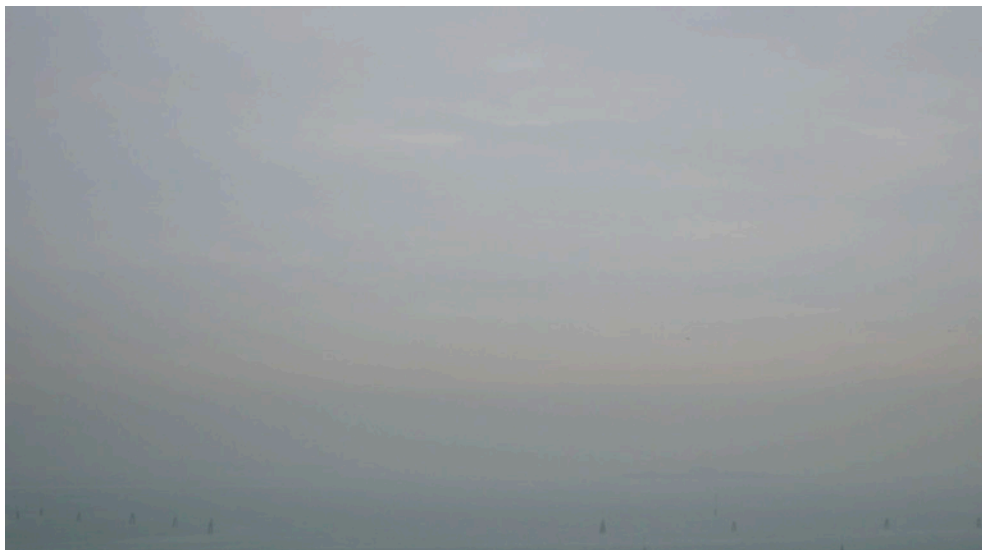
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