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Flux: The Ontological Status of Inflatable Forms

a response by Iman Salty

The formulaic “reveal, make manifest, extend, relate” encapsulates the simultaneous material and immaterial ontological status of inflatable architectures investigated by Katarzyna Balug in “Outside of Architecture: Between Mediating and Navigating the Air.” What does it mean to *reveal* the environment and how does this disrupt and contribute to our experience of spaces? With Balug’s discussion of Graham Stevens’ architecture—alongside correlating moments in the history of science, technology, space travel and flight—it becomes clear that at the core of this examination is the embodied, sensory experience of entering and inhabiting these inflatable structures. The phenomenological is intrinsic: how our relationships with the tangible materials framing the bubbled construction is enmeshed and mediated by the invisible properties providing the form constituting the contained architecture.

The wavering perceptibility of materials in these air-filled forms—in the sense that alongside the mediating plastic membrane, perceiving the infinitesimally contained matter extends beyond the bounds of human vision—is something I keep returning to when thinking about the idea of “revealing” the properties and aesthetics of air. In an effort to draw more from the fluctuating conditions of inflatable structures at the mercy of its materialities, I want to engage these architectures with thing theory, specifically notions of “entanglement” as discussed by archaeologist Ian Hodder. For Hodder, entanglement describes the various dependences and dependencies binding things to humans, humans to things, and

things to things. In this sense, entanglement metaphorically embodies the fluctuating responsiveness within these relations. The ontologies of these things and their “thingness” so to speak is revealed through their dependence on each other. One could then argue that the agency of things—as both material and immaterial matter—exists in these entangled, contingent relations.

For the inflatable forms, the structure, environment, and human occupant act on one another in a way that transforms the space itself and the experience of inhabiting the installation and sensing the surroundings. It is this responsiveness that seem to “reveal” and make perceptible the aesthetics of air. The reveal requires dwelling in the interior at the mercy of the exterior in order for this response to be recorded, where aesthetics of air are inscribed through the temporality of this experience. Hodder’s notion of entanglement is useful for considering the ways in which inflatable architectures perhaps require human agents as mutually constructive and destructive subjects entrapped in the forces of built environments. The potential for destruction resides in these interactions, as physical engagement with the inflatable surface contributes to the decay of the architectural membrane while transforming the spatial experience. Balug astutely recognizes the responsiveness of inflatable architectures as vulnerabilities. The susceptibility of form to environment and occupant becomes intrinsic to the longevity—or rather ephemerality—of the ontological status of the form itself. We can expand the ways we think about the fluctuating status of these structures through their temporalities that defy permanence, and yet are determinant for revealing elemental forces. In this vein, the most tangible ontology of inflatable form exists in responsiveness.

If inflatable architectures are distinguished by their temporality, then how is this contingent on specific atmospheric conditions that impact the aesthetics of air? In other words, how does the aesthetics of air evolve in response to climate change, or even the economy of airspace? Considering contemporary projects such as *Museo Aero Solar*, an international initiative by collective Aerocene in association with artist Tomás Saraceno that repurposes plastic bags into air sculptures, or *The Gas Trap* by architecture group Seattle Design Nerds, which comments on human dependence on gasoline, the inflatable architectures of today seem to prioritize not only the experiential but also a responsibility of environmental activism. As Balug contextualizes Graham Stevens’ inflatable architectures within histories of militarist applications of technologies and the Space Race, the inflatable structures of present and future appear to also be confronted with the dilemma of the increasing politicization of air; one that continues to reimagine the status of the perceivable and imperceivable authority of air as a material property.