

# Everything Volatile Solidifies Some Time (If Only for An Instant)

by Raphaël Brunel

In his essay *Architecture météorologique / Meteorological Architecture* (2009), Philippe Rahm argues that the purpose of architecture is to think and design the void. He reminds us that successive scientific discoveries have, since the seventeenth century, shown that the void is no such thing and that the air of which it is composed possesses physical, chemical, biological and electromagnetic qualities.<sup>1</sup> Since voids have already had their retrospective,<sup>2</sup> I shall dwell here on gas, the particular state by which they are filled, and its discrete influence on contemporary creation.

Over the course of the twentieth century, many artists explored the elementary and vital – or unstable and menacing – properties of air and its kinetic form: wind. This natural phenomenon was envisaged less in the perspective of representation and impression, such as we find in Courbet's *La Rafale de vent / The Gust of Wind*, 1865) or Debussy's *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest / What the West Wind Saw* (1910), and more in concrete terms: action and effect, recording or dispersion. Separately or together, these made it possible to introduce chance and (in)determination, distancing the figure of the creator and re-locating the spectator at the heart of the perceptual, giving shape to the formless and discombobulating architecture or the artistic institution. Since the subject suggests it, let me (in no particular order) cite certain instances. In 1919, Marcel Duchamp was in Buenos Aires when his sister announced her marriage to the painter Jean Crotti; by way of a wedding present, he posted instructions for his *Ready-Made Malheureux / Unhappy Ready-Made*. This required tying a geometry manual to the balcony of his apartment and 'leaving it to the wind to leaf through the book, choose the problems, expose them to the rain and tear off the pages like the petals of a daisy'.<sup>3</sup> In 1960, travelling between Paris and Nice, Yves Klein attached a pre-painted canvas to the roof of his car, thus 'recording the wind'<sup>4</sup> and allowing the elements to prematurely age the work's surface: *Vent Paris-Nice (COS10) / Paris-Nice Wind (COS10)*. And, in cahoots with Claude Parent, Klein laid the foundations of an architecture of air. *Air-Conditioning Show* (1966–67) brought together a series of texts and sketches by the group Art & Language, presented in a room air-conditioned but apparently empty, thus affording a theoretical interrogation of the nature and value of the air contained in the room. More ludic, Ryan Gander projected a current of cool air into the ground floor of the Fridericianum; it accompanied and 'inhabited' the visitors' trajectory during Documenta 13 (2012) and was entitled *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull)*. This list is of course incomplete and could be considerably extended by citing works based on human respiration. So what exactly is it about this projectile force (dis)incarnated by air and wind?

Having, since the late 1930s, engaged in an exploration of literary and poetic figures through the prism of the four elements, in 1943 Gaston Bachelard published a work dedicated to the element that concerns us: *L'Air et les Songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement / Air and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Working well before the discovery of global warming and

the hole in the ozone layer, Bachelard argued that thinking about air could be compared to immersion in a strange imaginary: 'My search will be limited, insofar as material imagination is concerned, because air is very thin matter. On the other hand, air offers a distinct advantage when one comes to the dynamic imagination. With air, movement takes precedence over matter. In this case, where there is no movement there is no matter.'<sup>5</sup> Ontologically, matter is what is permanent in things that change. Impermanent and invisible, air manifests itself through its fluxes, just like those divagations of which Bachelard makes it at once the yardstick and the vehicle – imagination in movement as much as movement imagined, but deprived of images and freed of retinal perception.<sup>6</sup> It is the imagination of poets and musicians, those who 'hear what they are creating in the creative act itself'.<sup>7</sup>

Model and matter for reverie, air and wind nevertheless retain a concrete reality. And it was indeed a musician who drew our attention to this physical truth. A central figure on the British experimental scene of the 1960s,<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Cardew in 1967 devised a score entitled *The Tiger's Mind*.<sup>9</sup> It is a prose composition describing the activity of a collective composed of six protagonists – Amy, the tiger, the wind, the tree, the circle and the mind – and seeks to suggest ways in which these protagonists can interact and affect one another. In this respect, the wind, as described by Cardew, is exemplary: 'Wind is insubstantial: visible and audible only through the objects in its path.'<sup>10</sup> Cardew's wind is movement and lack of substance, as in Bachelard, but pure perception, in that its presence or movement is indicated only when it encounters other bodies, tangling with the tangible in however fleeting and disinterested a relationship. Air becomes what connects things and people. Cardew glances at the analogy between freedom and the wind – but only a *contrario*: wind is the most highly determined of all the protagonists in both its interactions and 'the atmospheric and geographic conditions that generate it'.<sup>11</sup>

Emptiness replete with fullness, an insubstantial dynamic, a perception without image, a physical reality and a poetic springboard, at once determinism and liberty: the wind is the territory of ambivalence. Grab one end and the other gets away – probably because it doesn't have one.

If these several 'wind-marks', briefly exhibited here and there in the world, are anything to go by, one way into Rémi Dal Negro's practice – or at least an ideal exteriority from which to approach it – might be the movement of air, capricious and nugatory as it seems; we might approach it, either head-on or by intermediation, from a meteorological or atmospheric point of view – not that these words have, in his art, any overt ecological significance.

For there are, in Dal Negro's corpus, a number of works that effectively require the participation of the wind. Thus the series *Monolithe / Monolith* begun in 2012 consists of an *in situ* installation based on the in-out circulation produced by windows deliberately left open. This is akin to Michael Asher's intervention at the Clocktower in 1976. Known for his criticism of the art institution, Asher removed windows and doors in order to allow the street – its sounds, smells, and dust – to enter the gallery, thus highlighting the arbitrariness of the borders between art and everyday reality. Dal Negro, by contrast, simply obstructed these openings with the kind of plastic tarp habitually used to seal a broken pane and prevent cold drafts. But the dimensions of his tarps wildly exceeded those of the panes. Consequently, vast transparent bags are discovered indoors, flexing and tensing under the action of the wind. An unpredictable exterior redefines the internal. The

building-site aesthetic of *Monolithe* is at odds from any inflatable architectural structure like the stable and practical erections of Hans Walter-Müller, but Dal Negro's poetic gesture generates a volatile sculpture: these lungs, grafted to the fluctuating rhythm of the squall, are swollen and elevated in irregular respiration. The installation once in place, the artist has no control over the way the wind models this inert matter. The title might therefore seem deceptive, so much does the notion of 'monolith' evoke the fixed materiality of rock. If our description suggests a spectacular and monumental intervention, the work may nevertheless disappoint when the wind, which should animate the plastic sacks like a puppeteer, leaves them flaccid if not indeed flat. Paradoxically, *Monolithe* becomes a locus of movement and impermanence – the sculptural volumes of the work are the subject of an impromptu variation, as are the sounds made by the air rushing into the tarps, which varies between shuddering hesitancy, a bubbling rattle and a great roaring.

The sound potential of the wind sketched out in *Monolithe* has become more explicit through two works installed out of doors but also suggesting experimental DIY (or DIY experimentation). *Migrations* (2015) comprises several windsocks each supplied with a bird-whistle imitating a migrant;<sup>12</sup> when the wind blows, the birds begin to sing. This aleatoric bagpipe then gives voice, sounding like a cry or an alarm. For Bachelard, the bird is a poetic figure of the air, but bird-migration here recalls the cross-border human avalanche and its thunderous impact on current affairs. *L'Étendoir / Clothes Line* (2009–2015) is another of Dal Negro's aeolian instruments. The rubber lines stretched between two posts might bring to mind the work of Lithuanian artist Zilvinas; in his installations, magnetic tapes vibrate lightly on the passage of visitors or float in conditioned air. But his works remain silent and cannot be recorded, whereas *L'Étendoir* is designed as an object for sound-capture and listening. Equipped with piezos and amplified, the whirling 'strings' of the instrument, jounced by the wind, produce a swathe of swirling sonorities, testifying to the state of the weather no less than the passage of time. As if in a hybrid field-recording, the sounds thus registered, a 'meteorological sound-report' (Dal Negro), afford a concrete reworking of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Trained in classical music, and the baroque in particular, Dal Negro here plays on the stereotypes about a prolix and virtuoso musician today denigrated because his seasonal hits have invaded the supermarket and airport concourse. The celebrated airs of the Italian composer are replaced by what we might describe, in Klein's formula, as 'a music of the air'. The first *L'Étendoir* sessions produced a vinyl entitled *Primavera / Spring* (2015); its A-side is an edit of the collision between meteorological inclemency and rubber bands, while its B-side features an unprecedented mix of A-side and Vivaldi. The disc is accompanied by a series of engravings whose point of departure was an eighteenth-century portrait of Vivaldi discovered on the Internet, on which the artist has operated a series of digital modulations and distortions suggesting the use of peddle-effects. The physical and sonic torsion of *L'Étendoir* is matched by the visual distortion of the engravings. Each season will, in due course, have its own vinyl and multiple.

We have seen that Dal Negro sets up instruments on which the weather can perform. But he has also dwelt on the reverse phenomenon: the displacement of air produced by a conventional musical instrument. Sound is a vibration propagated in the form of longitudinal waves. Playing on any kind of instrument makes the air throb. Like artists Dominique Blais, Rainier Lericolais and Nicolas Fenouillat, Dal Negro aspires to represent and materialise that impalpable, invisible

soundwave – so like the wind – by manifesting its outlines in a geography or cartography of sound. The series 'One Kick', begun in 2015, follows this logic. In mechanical fashion, as if attacking a material in order to carve it, Dal Negro hits one beat on a drum. This he records to obtain a 3D spectrogram: an in-the-round image of this vibration matching its duration, frequency and intensity; the spectrogram is carved into a ball of pear or lime wood, then varnished and mounted on a snare or a floor tom. For the bass drum, he reverses this procedure, exhibiting the stump of the pear tree used as above without the slightest intervention, and seeks to reconstitute the sound that might be modeled by these rugged curves eroded by parasites; thus we are given to hear the centennial temporality of this slice of wood. By way of a synthesis, *Bumble Drum Bubble Rumble* (2016–18) is a performance in which the wind-action at work in *Monolithe* is supplanted by the energy of one or more percussionists activating a prepared instrument;<sup>13</sup> the air-vibrations produced give gradual 'rise' to an inflatable sculpture, which unfurls into the space before collapsing and emptying over a period of several hours.

In the light of these few works, we might say that the work of Dal Negro is a quest for effect. Not in the sense of spectacle, but of an attentive letting-go of actions whose result is constantly being re-defined. The movement of air that animates certain of his pieces is not so much a matter of dispersion, more the trace of a passage, an imprint, a relationship to inscription and carving. It emphasises the outlines – suddenly visible and apprehensible – of a phenomenon lacking substance and constancy. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* 'all that is solid melts into air'<sup>14</sup> and we might be tempted to invert their proposition in relation to Dal Negro: 'everything volatile solidifies sometime', even when this crystallisation is as ephemeral as in *Monolithe*. But the question of duration cannot be avoided, since Dal Negro is reflecting on instantaneity conceived both as pure present ('I want to be able to listen to the present, to stop having fixed ideas on things,' Dal Negro declares) and as image. Consequently, it is no surprise that his latest terrain of exploration is photography. But the instant signifies only by repetition or addition. Dal Negro therefore entrusts the respiration of his *Monolithe* to the arrhythmia of the squall, or, arranging several *One Kicks* in space, disposes different strokes and sonorities necessarily defining a silent temporal scansion. As he does in his recent photographs, each taken within a few seconds of another, Dal Negro designs and reworks interval and spacing. And it is in this temporality, in this fragile tween-time, that his practice seems to blossom.

<sup>1</sup> See Philippe Rahm, *Architecture météorologique*, Paris, Archibooks, 2009, 35–40.

<sup>2</sup> *Voids. A Retrospective*, Centre Pompidou, 2009. See also the excellent catalogue of the same title, multiple editors, JRP Ringier, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, Geneva, Mamco, 2015, 45. The work was in due course torn by the wind and rain. The only remaining trace of this meteorological ready-made is a single photo and a Suzanne Duchamp painting entitled *Ready-Made malheureux de Marcel*.

<sup>4</sup> 'For instance, a trip from Paris to Nice might have been a waste of time, had I not spent it profitably by recording the wind. I placed a canvas, freshly coated with paint, on the roof of my white Citroën. As I drove down Route nationale 7 at 100 kilometres an hour, the heat, the cold, the light, the wind, and the rain all combined to age my canvas prematurely. At least thirty to forty years were condensed into a single day'. Yves Klein, *Chelsea Hotel Manifesto*, 1961, see <http://www.artep.net/kam/manifesto.html>

<sup>5</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Air and Dreams. An Essay in the Imagination of Movement*, tr. E. R. Farrel and C. Frederick Farrell, Dallas, Dallas Institute Publications, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2011, 8.

<sup>6</sup> For Bachelard, 'Perceiving and imagining are as antithetical as presence and absence. To imagine is to absent oneself, to launch out toward a new life'. *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Cardew (1936–81) notably took part in the free improvisation group AMM and, with Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons, founded the Scratch Orchestra. Known for his graphic scores, such as the *Treatise*, which broke with conventional notation systems, he conceived of musical creation as a democratic space in which the performers play an active role on a par with that of the composer.

<sup>9</sup> On Cardew's score, the reader is encouraged to refer to the work conducted at CAC Brétigny in 2012 by Matthieu Saladin. His own solo exhibition at the Salle Principale in Paris (2018) has as its title Cardew's introduction to the *Wind*: 'Wind is insubstantial: visible and audible only through the objects in its path'.

<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Cardew, *The Tiger's Mind*, London, Hinrichsen Edition Ltd, 1967, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> 'Wind is a persuasive image of freedom – blowing when and where it wants, now hot now cold, now hard now soft, now sweet now sour, frequently screaming, wailing, whimpering, groaning but never suffering, always intact – but crack this image and behind it we find that wind is totally determined throughout its insubstantial being – on the one side by the atmospheric and geographical conditions that generate it and on the other by the form, size and substance of the obstacles in its path. Sometimes wind seems to vanish completely for days on end, but this is an illusion – he is ever-present.' *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Among the migrant birds whose calls are imitated by the bird-whistles are the golden plover, lapwing, widgeon, hazel grouse, skylark, great tit, teal, common partridge, and curlew.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting in relation to Dal Negro's use of a rhythmic instrument that John Cage considered his prepared pianos a percussion ensemble.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Harmondsworth, 1987, 83.