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## Air Art

Willoughby Sharp

### *1 Some remarks*

*...Art Acts...*

Naum Gabo

Art's enemy is the object. Reality is events, not objects. Static structures are anachronisms. They are irrelevant to today's cultural and technological situation. It's idiotic and immoral to make such objects as art now. Objects perpetuate the fallacy of simple location. They misrepresent reality by offering boundaries as the essence of a body or thing, the essence of a body as thing. Reality is energy, not things.

*More, the obligation- the morality, if you wish- of all the arts today is to intensify, alter perceptual awareness and, hence, consciousness . . . Awareness and consciousness of what? Of the real material world.*

John Cage

Art should burst boundaries, abolish absolutes. Object art is over. We are moving away from the physical view of reality as that which exists to a kinetic conception of reality as that which seems to occur. This is a shift from being to becoming. Time is measured. Duration begins with divisions of time into units. Kinetic works destroy lineal time. Kinetic works do not contain time, they create time. Static states stop. Kinetic sculpture is beginning to establish a subject-

Facing page **Jeffrey Shaw and Tjebbe Van Tijen**  
*Head environment* February 27 to March 9, 1967

'This work was a pneumatic cinematic environment which included the following:—*Glove screen*: a cluster of translucent rubber gloves whose state of inflation could be modulated by the audience from a foot valve. Films were projected from behind into the gloves. *Air bed*: a large inflated pillow which could be jumped around on, thus activating whistles attached around the edge. *Tube screen*: a 20 ft.-long, 6 ft.-wide polythene tube into which film was projected. Balloons and whistles inside could be blown by the audience. *Head environment*: a large balloon bag for putting your head in only which was serviced by a system of microphones and earphones, inflated tubes, and water flow through reservoirs and piping.' Photo: Clay Perry



Below left **Akira Kanayama** *Balloon* 1968 Photo: S. Morikawa

Below **Takis** *The impossible: man in space* November 1960  
 Galerie Iris Clert, Paris

'I needed a realistic replacement for Sinclair Beiles who could not stay floating for twenty-four hours. A balloon replacement was closer to reality than a wooden image would have been, so I bought an elastic aquasuit on Blvd. St. Germain and got a pair of rubber gloves and a balloon, welded them together, and took it to a garage attendant to inflate with ordinary air. Then I took this elastic inflatable man and attached it to an iron belt. The attraction of my super magnet made the inflatable float in the gallery.' Paris, February 1968 (in conversation-interview with the author). Photo: Hans Haacke



system dialectic capable of integrating us with the environment. We have reached the end of disinterestedness, impartiality, and contemplation. We are embarking on a new phase of artistic awareness in which interest, partiality, and participation are the chief characteristics. Involvement mitigates the inside-outside split and destroys the subject-object duality. Fusion brings us into a single spiritual body.

*I know of no occupation in American life so meaningless and unproductive as that of art critic.*

Dan Flavin

The proper response to art is not criticism but art. Today criticism is useless. It isn't even interesting. Or influential. Language lies. Metaphors are mistakes. Nothing is like anything else. To think that things are the same is inane. Words no longer work. They have lost their significance. Words became meaningless when they stopped pointing beyond themselves. To become meaningful again, words, like art and life, have to be emptied out, transparent, void.

The problem is to acknowledge the void, to accept loss. Forever.

*Break on through to the other side.*

The Doors

Air art is an art of absence. Much of it is almost invisible. Inflatable and immaterial sculpture corresponds to the void in reality. Each work is the manifestation of the artist's immaterial spirit. It is an art without fixed form. Sometimes without form at all. It is not solid and has little substance. Some of this sculpture is executed as performance and lasts only for the duration of its public presentation. Much of it is disposable. Some of the air artists want their work to be thrown away after it is exhibited. Much of it is completely uncommercial in attitude. All of this work goes through simple life cycles—birth, death, rebirth. Many of the works indicate the identity of inner and outer space. Some works are so transparent that light goes through them rather than on them. To see is to see through. To discover the invisible reality one has to break through the false reality-principle.

Air art doesn't interpret reality, it is reality.

## 2 Some historical references

*Establish a society  
in which the individual  
has to pay for the air he breathes  
(air meters; imprisonment  
and rarified air, in  
case of non-payment).  
Simple asphyxiation if  
necessary (cut off the air)*

Marcel Duchamp

Leonardo da Vinci was the first artist to understand the inherent aesthetic character of air. He created a pneumatic environment by using inflated pig's bladders in a small room.

Marcel Duchamp was the first artist in our century to use air as an artistic medium. After discussing inflatables and flying sculpture with Picasso around 1914, he produced a glass globe containing 50 cc of pure *Paris Air* (1919).

Twenty years later Moholy-Nagy advocated inflatable furniture through the use of compressed air (see *Vision in Motion*, Chicago, 1947, p. 46).

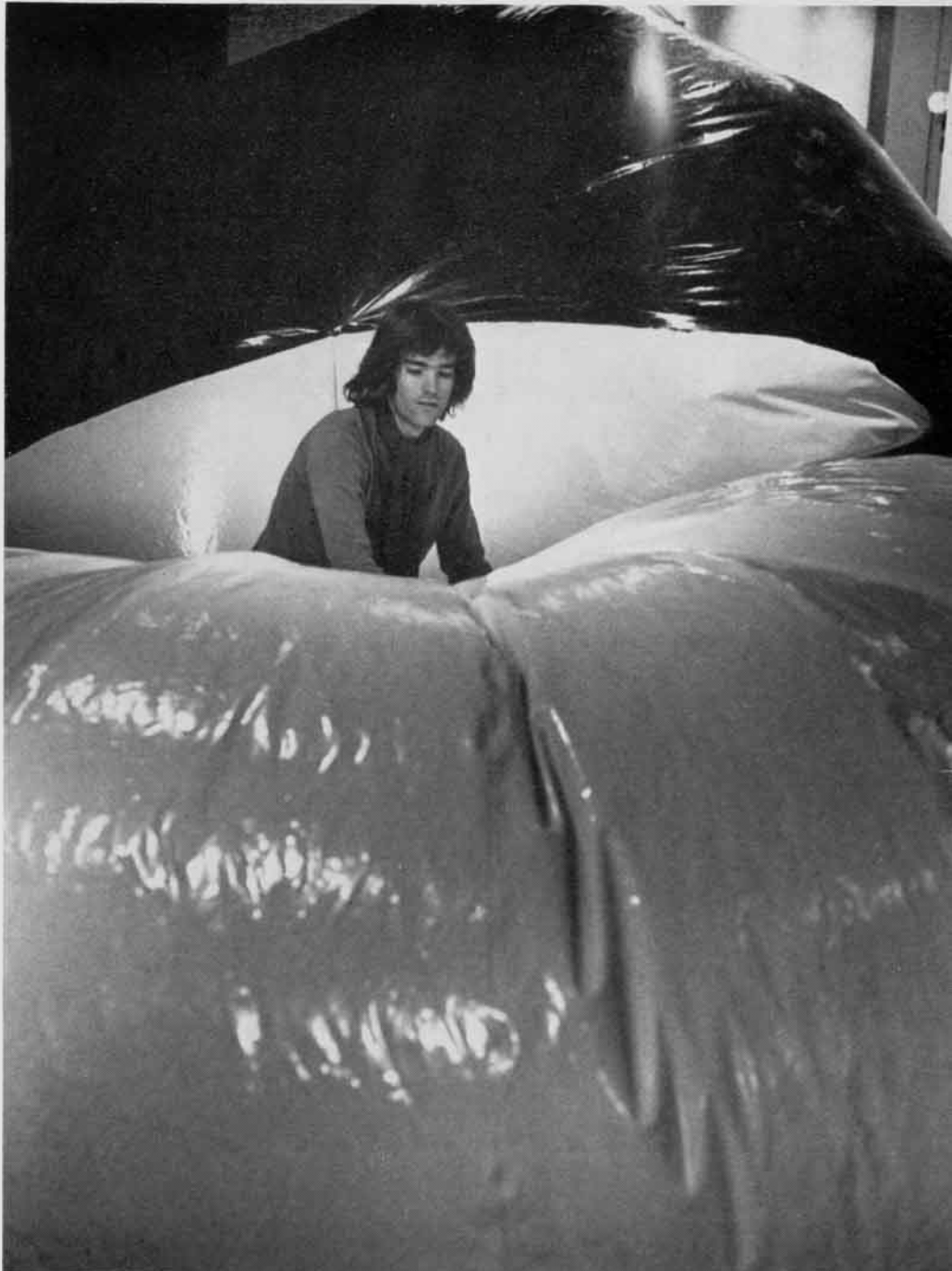
More recently a great number of kineticists have made extensive use of air. Yves Klein (1928–62), one of the pivotal figures in post-war European art, constructed the first 'aerostatic sculpture' or 'immaterials', one thousand and one balloons floating over Place St. Germain des Près during his Paris exhibition in 1957. His close friend, Piero Manzoni, made *Floating Bodies* and a large range of inflatable work including several architectural projects using air. The Group T in Milan did a *Large Pneumatic Sculpture* in 1959.

The Zero Group's *Demonstrations* (1961) utilized hundreds of white helium-filled balloons which were released into the Düsseldorf sky.

Recently, as a result of the great interest in inflatable structures, two exhibitions were devoted to air art. The Utopie Group (J. Aubert, J-P. Jungmann, A. Stinco and others) organized an exhibition entitled 'Structures gonflables', which opened on March 1 at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris. The exhibition, which is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue with essays entitled, 'Essai sur technique et société', 'Considérations inactuelles sur le gonflable', and 'Particularité des structures gonflables' by Utopie, contains more than one hundred examples of inflatable structures from the inflatable satellite, *Echo 1* (in a photograph) to a balloon advertising a well-known *apéritif*, 'St. Raphaël'. A second exhibition entitled 'Air Art', opened at the Philadelphia Arts Council on March 13. It contained one sculptural work each by Hans Haacke, Akira Kanayama, Les Levine, Preston McClanahan, David Medalla, Robert Morris, Marcello Salvadori, Graham Stevens, John Van Saun and Andy Warhol, as well as a multimedia demonstration by the Architectural Association Group, London (S. Connolly, J. Devas, D. Harrison, D. Martin). □

Above, right **Andy Warhol** *Silver pillows* 1966  
View of exhibition, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York  
'I hate objects.' Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt

Right **Graham Stevens** *Pneumatic environment* 1968  
'The structure is single skin fluorescent P.V.C.-coated nylon air structure H.F. welded in the form of two folding hemispheres connected by a cylinder. Overall length 20 ft and radius 5 ft. The inside is weighted and floored with a 15 ft 6 in. layflat heavy-gauge polythene liquid container. Erection time is approximately half an hour from arrival at internal or external site. Weight approx. 70 lbs. Prototypes made at Intertherm Ltd Brixton by G. Stevens and Simon Frazer. Manufactured by Eastwood Plastics Ltd, Arterial Road, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. Distribution by Unlimited Ltd, Widcombe Manor, Bath.' Photo: Nina Raginsky





Left **Robert Morris** *Steam* 1967–8

'Sculpture. For want of a better term, that grouping of work which does not present obvious information content or singularity of focus. It is not dominated by the obviousness of looming scale, overly rich materials, intimate size, didactic ordering. It neither impresses, dominates, nor seduces. Elements or various focuses are often in it, but more integrated, relative and more powerfully organized ways. Successful work in this direction differs from both previous sculpture (and from objects) in that its focus is not singularly inward and exclusive of the context of its spatial setting. It is less introverted in respect to its surroundings. Sometimes this is achieved by literally opening up the form in order that the surroundings must of necessity be seen with the piece. (Transparency and translucency of material function in a different way in this respect since they maintain an inner "core" which is seen through but is nevertheless closed off.)' Photo: Jeff Baumann

Below **David Medalla** *Cloud canyon* 1963–8

'My sculptures breathe and perspire, grow and decay. They correspond to my view of external and internal realities. . . . I use the elements—through the elements I wish to express the dynamism of atomic forces. I seek to find, through these forces, continuous "melodic structures" which could arouse tenderness and love in the brutalized soul of man.' Photo: Clay Perry

