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# Take My Breath Away

Atmospheric Aestheticazion

Master's thesis in Fine Art

Supervisor: Jacob Jessen

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Architecture and Design  
Trondheim Academy of Fine Art



**Abstract**

Examining the different aspects of artistic expression and aesthetic outcome, this thesis will work with and through the artwork *Take My Breath Away*. Introducing ways of facilitating lasting experiences in audiences at art exhibitions, and -events, and as an auxiliary, to help alleviate the pressure artists, as a byproduct of tradition, will put on themselves. Through proposing a percept of altering the atmospheric composition to that of an altitude of 2000 meters above sea level, considering the merits of this fabrication in relation to the research question: *What constitutes artistic and aesthetic experiences, and what agencies are present in them?* Concluding that the result of the proposed percept is not adding weight to this question. Furthermore, the thesis examines the possibilities of the audience's agency within the work and exhibition to challenge an a-contextual understanding of art – and proposes an aesthetic strategy that utilizes the surroundings as way to inform the presentation.

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## Introduction

### Contexts

*Take My Breath Away*, the project described, analyzed, and discussed in this thesis comes out of a practice that works with the meeting between art and its audience. Not only to mediate as a form of curatorial exercise but also in an attempt to force the different contexts that the artwork and the audience brings to the artistic experience to be treated as equally important in the conversation. The aim is to remind the participants and actors involved that they all have agency and responsibility with regards to the aesthetic experience, not only to present as objects but to engage in each their own terms. Thus, the meaning and importance of context to the aesthetic experience in contemporary/fine art, is a core perspective in this thesis as well as the practice in general.

### Mechanics

The physical existence of the work will comprise only of the exhibition label<sup>1</sup>. This label will be captioned with a text describing that the atmospheric composition of the exhibition space has been changed from that of normal sea level (78 percent nitrogen, 21 percent oxygen) to a simulated elevation of approximately 2000 meters above sea level (where atmospheric composition is the same but the lower pressure at altitude means there is 20 percent less material to inhale, resulting in around 16 percent oxygen saturation) – and further notify the audience that this is to give them a feeling of becoming dizzy from experiencing the artworks or exhibition in general. Within research in sports medicine, this would be used to elevate an athlete's blood values (higher hemoglobin and hematocrit levels), in order for their cardiovascular system to work more efficient<sup>2</sup> or to acclimatize for competition held at altitude<sup>3</sup>.

The works physicality would be to increase the level of nitrogen in the different venues of the exhibition. This would be done by letting out nitrogen from 50 kg canisters straight into the respective rooms. This is in sports medicine referred to as altitude chambers or altitude tents. In elite sports and research scenarios this would be carried out in building tailored or retrofitted to be as airtight as possible and with computer monitored release of the gas. In this project it wouldn't be feasible to install airlocks on all entrances, pressure-check windows, and close of ventilation, so a larger amount of gas would need to be released from the canisters at a quicker pace. Because of this the work will be acted out as a placebo.

### Aesthetics

*In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree – to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression. For what the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation's agenda. It is also the historical moment by which we happen to be governed.*

- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 11<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For tentative label see Appendix A

<sup>2</sup> Ø. Sandbakk, R. Talsnes, *Høydetrening i utholdenhetsidretter – hva vet vi egentlig og når bør det benyttes?*

<sup>3</sup> T. Hetland, Ø. Sandbakk, R. Talsnes, *Akklimatisering til utholdenhetskonkurranser i mellomhøyde – hvorfor og hvordan?*

<sup>4</sup> G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.15

This quote on the political aestheticizations and the analysis on how to counter it, bears a close resemblance to the approach to aesthetics that this project, and the practice at large, works by. The aesthetic experience in this practice generally works through a communicative form to address the audience while their mind is free to create their own experience based on their personal context – what they bring to the game. The aesthetic strategy of the practice is therefore to stage the works or projects in a neutral way according to the society at large in their given context. Do not decorate in order to look apart, but to look the part – meaning each project will act out according to the surrounding cultural landscape it seeks to inhabit, influenced by the *umwelt* in both time and space in order to pose questions into these entities. This method of mirroring the surrounding environments and their tendencies, also has the potential to endorse the disruption of different predicaments of class – be it cultural or others. This is achieved by giving audiences that are not sensitive to all questions posed by the work a possibility to take the percept at face value, instead of pressuring them to “figure it out”.

### Method

The methodology used on, and in developing, the project is a critical and conversational analysis. This is used as a tool to engage different spheres and knowledges and emphasized in order to avoid a modernist<sup>5</sup> image of the artist as a demigod or high priest – the ivory tower and genius creator. As Lyotard notes in the chapter *The Nature of the Social Bond: The Postmodern Perspective* in his book *The Postmodern Condition*:

*“In the common use of discourse, in a discussion between two friends for example, the speakers unfold in the best way, all the while shifting play from one statement to another: the question, the prayer, the assertion, the narrative is wrestled around during the struggle. [Here the two friends could instead be played by the artist, the artwork, the audience or society in general] This is not without rules, but its rules empower and encourage the greatest possible flexibility in statements.”*<sup>6</sup>

The background rests on the critique-class as an art educational tool of guaranteeing informed critique, and the conversation as a way to open this up from just being the clique that these groups also turn in to. This can resemble a critical relationship, insisting on keeping both open and going.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Lyotard, *Viden og det Postmoderne Samfund*, p. 33

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39



## The Piece as a Concept

This is the work – lowering the relative oxygen content of the exhibition venues to levels simulating those of a height of around 2000 meters above sea level.

Except it isn't.

The art in this specific piece is the suggestion to the audience that there is something in the exhibition that they will have to recognize and notice within – and of – themselves. This is both *Take My Breath Away*, and the other works the exhibition consists of. The main proposition of the project is consequently that there is a conversation creating the totality of the exhibition experience between the artworks/exhibition at large, and the audience – with both parties being much closer together in this creation than in the conversation on the audience as a requisite (if a tree falls in the woods [...]).

While this should not be viewed as anything new or provocative it is none-the-less far from a necessity in experiencing most artworks within, or adjacent to, modernist traditions such as formal sculptures and paintings, but also some performative practices (a scene is also an object), where the subject-object barrier is still a functional reality if not a stated one. This is not an attempt to throw shade on all artworks in these categories – traditions in the artworld (market) heavily favors art that communicates to, rather than with, the audience – so it is only natural that this is a mainstay even after the destruction of the image by perpetuation through social media – and the destruction of the object as the logical outcome within the dichotomy of climate destruction/hyper consumerism. These traditions include art being stated and restated as commodities. It is being conveyed as acquisitions of decoration and class affiliation, snobbing both up and down and not necessarily consistently so. Here, the already nearly-non-physical nature of *Take My Breath Away* challenges the narrative of art as decorative objects – its presence is neither something to behold with your eyes nor to keep in your grasp. It lends itself to being forgotten when experiencing the rest of the exhibition, only to spring back to mind when again being confronted with the label by the entrance to the venue(s). The reality is that a change in altitude from 0 to 2000 meters above sea level – for however long time – will not give the viewer any sensation of shortness or loss of breath unless they perform physical exercise near or at their respective threshold intensities.<sup>78</sup> The concept will then further be tested and put into action by the fact that no part of the claims made by the exhibition label will exist, other than the reflections and awareness the proposition will offer to the audience. This done in this instance of the project to underline the lack of object, pointing in the same direction as Julia Kristeva is in this quote: *“It is thus not the absence of purity or health that constitutes the abject, but that which shakes an identity, a system, an order. That which doesn't respect boundaries, places, or rules. That which is in between, [...]. The imposter [...].”*<sup>9</sup> where the abject is more a non-object than the result of an abjection, or excretion.

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<sup>7</sup> Ø. Sandbakk, R. Talsnes, *Høydetrening i utholdenhetsidretter – hva vet vi egentlig og når bør det benyttes?*

<sup>8</sup> Also referred to by Prof. Ø. Sandbakk in conversation with me at Toppidrettssenteret, Granåsen 11.03.22

<sup>9</sup> Kristeva. (2008). From *Pouvoir de l'horreur : essai sur l'abjection* (1980). In *Estetisk teori : en antologi* (p. 399).

## The Piece as a Percept

Reaching a viewer, circumventing the distance between what has been produced as art and the viewer is a key challenge many artists have undertaken<sup>10</sup>. According to the artist Nanna Abell, this was one of her primary reasons for starting to work with scent<sup>11</sup> – it is apparently the sense that is the closest aligned with memories and emotions hereby supposedly bypassing the viewer as a being of reason – the rational animal. I became interested in this notion through the people mentioned, and through that art is – according to some – best viewed with a hangover or otherwise compromised. This effect can be obtained through several more or less elegant features or strategies, from *Critical Run*<sup>12</sup>, to excessive drinking at an opening or staging marathon-meta-discussions to wear out the viewers that hold out through it all. I have throughout my practice entertained the different strategies mentioned, and the reasons to implement them, foregoing the possibility to reach or hack the viewer, sounds great, no? A central part of my practice is also to mimic already existing aesthetics, much for the same reasons as why you would try to alter the perception of the public – avoiding fighting against our common cultural baggage, and rather use what language has already been taught us by society at large.

Now, I have always been attracted to maps and especially topological maps. Seeing indicators of the earth's surface being more than a simple plain, and then discovering, when venturing outside, the differences in possibilities and how to engage with a space that is other-than-flat (moving from Denmark to Norway at a young age), experiencing grand vistas and being humbled by towering cliffs. The changes in scenery and features going above tree line and into alpine environments being the most obvious, but also gradually feeling more and more out of breath, and an oncoming headache. Hypoxia is a condition that is to an extent, symptomatically related to a hangover. It can be somewhat impractical to install an exhibition on top of a mountain, not to say ecologically unsound – guests to the exhibition would most likely be a certain crowd of enthusiasts, and at least exclude some people on basis of their in/ability to climb said mountain. This can be a material circumstance to work with, but not what I wanted for this project forming in my mind. Instead, I started looking into altitude chambers, as I remembered that these were hotly debated in Norwegian news during my childhood. Altitude chambers are artificial environments created to simulate the lower pressure, and thereby lower oxygen saturation in the bloodstream, at altitude to heighten hematocrit and hemoglobin levels, much like EPO or other PED's. Translating such a chamber into the setting of an exhibition/parts of one, is difficult. Lowering pressure in non-purpose-built structures is to my imagination almost impossible, so one would have to "cheat" to develop the same symptoms as altitude sickness. A safe way to do this would be to heighten nitrogen levels by the same amount of percentage points. The project would need surveillance of atmospheric components, and because of leaks in the venues will need to be constantly topped up by releasing new nitrogen from tanks. To accommodate parts of the public unable, or unwilling, to experience the work personal bottles of oxygen can be sold at the main venue, these are already readily available at stores in high altitude locations in for example Colorado. The work as it will exist will not need this as any effects noticed by the audience will be placebo anyway, with or without an oxygen deprived environment. As the work is about the contexts of creating the aesthetic experience, the placebo is sited in the production and not in the presentation.

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<sup>11</sup> Abell, N. (2014). *AW14 (BETONFLAKON)* [Installation]. Skovsnogen Artspace (n.d.), retrieved from <http://nannaabell.com/works1.html>

<sup>12</sup> Colonel/Geoffroy, T. (2007-) *Critical Run* [Event], Retrieved from: <http://www.emergencyrooms.org/criticalrun.html>

## Contexts

Coming over a need to question this is a vulnerable position to be in, there will always be a possibility that you either are not, or that you are too much for what you thought\_ – at least not right in the way you want to be. It's uncertainty.

I am here as a visitor, long term, but I'm here for what I can learn, not to establish authority or myself as one. This creates a need for a certain way of living – less fluff for oneself and more to share, more to fit in to. As a rule, I would say that there are others that are better than me to aestheticize and give form to objects. Aestheticizing a work, to me, gives more layers to confront and cross for an audience that is experiencing a piece of art. This can be beneficial, a thing to strive for, but in my mind – to me – it is too often a desperate effort to give more meaning to a project that you might have lost of your meaning of. In my works as of the last 5-6 years these realizations have come to mean that I will try to avoid giving physicality to my projects.

I am producing this work, that will attempt to give the public an experience of being 20 atmospheres above sea level. In being an atmospheric artwork made after smoking indoors have generally been disallowed, it will be set in step with Ryan Ganders *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize (The Invisible Pull)*<sup>13</sup> from Documenta 13, where the work consisted of an empty first floor of the Fridericianum with fans blowing a gentle wind to cool the public in the sweltering German summer. One key element of difference between the works being that Gander did not have a “normally” populated exhibition space, instead it was white walls, white plinths and what looks to be, pretty, monochrome (if not white) art objects. For this version of my installation, I would like it to be in a normally equipped exhibition space. This is because the other primary artistic context of this part of the project is to be part of a graduation show – something intrinsically cobwebbed and boundary breaking. Treating this, or any other work in this setting, like a singularity would be doing a great disservice to all the practices that have made up one's time at the program. This work is, with all its potential faults, also an exploration of how we as artists can help each other out through the specifics of our respective practices.

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<sup>13</sup> Gander, R. (2012) *I need some meaning I can memorize (The Invisible Pull)* [Installation]. Lafayette anticipations - Fonds de dotation Famille Moulin (n.d) Paris, FR. Retrieved from: <https://www.lafayetteanticipations.com/en/collection/oeuvre/i-need-some-meaning-i-can-memorize-invisible-pull-ryan-gander>

## Method

### Generative

The primary method used for this project is, as mentioned, a conversational practice, as described by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*<sup>14</sup>, coupled with a process of critique as found in most art academies operating in a northern and western European tradition. The hierarchy of these two concepts are not important, but they are affecting each other in differing ways. The conversation, here, is not at point in time as a dialogue – it is continuous regardless of the participants but centered on a wider theme or narrower concept.

### Aestheticization

The aim of this thesis, practice in general and the specific method is to let the whole of the audience get an experience from the [a] project – and leave the bourgeois notion of taste behind: “[...] or the upper-class propriety which treats taste as one of the surest signs of true nobility and cannot conceive of referring taste to anything other than itself.”<sup>15</sup> The argument being that there is no reason to “dumb it down” or to cater to certain tastes in order for the given work to function for people of different backgrounds. The methodology used to negotiate the project is also generative of the aesthetic experience produced, in cooperation with the audience. In addition to this there is also an aesthetic method to be applied when process encounters an audience, and the stratification that the meeting is likely to escalate, especially the differences in class – and of classes of culture, economy, and administration. Using a method derived from Jean Baudrillard’s literary work *America*<sup>16</sup>, in which Baudrillard’s outlay of the hyper fictive nature of the united-station society underlines this thesis’ proposal of our collected decentralized reading of what is the [artistic] act before us. The insistence in the congeniality of reality and the reaffirmations of our collective fictions is used here to act as a camouflage. Concealed contraband has a higher chance of reaching its goal. This relates the aesthetic experience to be other, or more, than sensory gratification [decoration] – not as a joke on the audience’s behalf. The goal is to have projects be multi levelled, building intricacy into it not to have one complex meaning but several possibilities to attain a personally successful experience in the work. As simulating the surroundings of the project so in effect the audience can create these experiences from their own context. This comes as a result from using a de-formalized version of a PEST-analysis<sup>17</sup> – de-formalized as it being more an *omverdens*[umwelt]-analysis– foregoing the parts of PEST-analysis that relates mostly to profit-first enterprises, adding artistic contexts and considering that this is an often more precarious configuration with more fleeting end-users, and the mix of artist and institution as a collective broadcast/publishing-body. The stratification of the audience that will invariably happen, is with this method of aesthetization given a multilayered outcome of the work that enables the audience, in their disparity, to engage with the work in their own way – taking it at face value or homing in on specifics of the different real-life applications of lowered oxygen saturation environments.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Lyotard, *Viden og det Postmoderne Samfund*, p. 39

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu, P., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, p. 11

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard. (1988). *Amerika*. Profil.

<sup>17</sup> Guldbrandsen, I. (2017), *PESTEL-analyse*, In *Medie- og kommunikationsleksikon*  
<https://medieogkommunikationsleksikon.dk/pestel/> [28.03.22]

## Critique

Working with communication as an artistic and aesthetic strategy focused on in a contextual and sociological setting is a challenge. Of course. Insisting on lying as close to the thematic and contextual surroundings in time and space leads to very real and potentially big blind angles. In short: instead of acting as the artistic questioning of the status quo, the projects in question can become highly normative, upholding of the exact arrangements they're meant to question. This edge is something that the project, and practice in general, benefits from and exploits, but there is a necessity to keep being critical especially in this regard. Still, the aesthetic strategy has the added possibility to act as a negotiating tool in discussions exactly because it uses the skin of society to gain recognition in its questioning.

It also has to be noted here that the thesis is heavily skewed towards white western European male theorists and artists, a bias that both has to do with my lack of academic skill – leading to almost exclusively utilizing canonized references and not going into the niches available – and that I'm a white middleclass male that primarily has had white middleclass male supervisors. This is also something I've written before, and as such haven't done enough about.

## Conclusion – Futureproof

The project proper has yet to come into existence. In keeping with the project's stated intent, that process is most of all a question of practice, this project has become a culmination of immateriality and delimitation of questions of subject v. object with the explicit lack of anything other than an exhibition label. In this, the central question of the thesis is put to the test. Depending on the reactions the project garners, it could be expanded to include more presence in way of adding the stated atmospheric change not deemed necessary here.

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## Appendix A

### Tentative Label – Take My Breath Away

The ventilation system is being used to administer extra nitrogen into the exhibition space. Atmospheric composition is changed to that of a height of 2000 meters above sea level. Altitude chambers, such as what this room is now, is normally used to enhance the physical abilities in elite athletes – akin to blood-doping, but not sanctioned as such. This will not make you a better art audience, but it can make you feel lightheaded. Without this happening: does your dizziness and shaky legs come from onset altitude sickness or does the exhibition itself knock you to the floor?

