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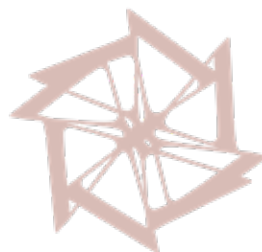
ATMOSPHERE

Art History and the Political Ecologies of Air

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“The Birds Try to Beat Down the Ocean,” page from a dispersed series of the *Panchatantra* (Artist/maker unknown, India, 18th Century) Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994.

In the twenty-first century there is a growing struggle for the atmospheric commons and the very right to breathe. Studying the history of how the atmospheric and cartographic sciences developed alongside colonial extraction and weaponization of the air helps us to understand how the air is anything but an empty vessel or neutral presence. Studying the representation of breathing is also an important task for scholars seeking to decolonize art history. The watercolor, “The Birds Try to Beat Down the Ocean,” tells the story of a family of lapwings, which are nesting shorebirds, who seek help from Garuda, the vehicle (*vahana*) of the god Vishnu, to rescue their eggs from the ocean. The image tells a different story of the air and the ocean than cartographic or atmospheric drawings of the same period by European artists and scientists. This image is located in the Stella Kramrisch Collection. Kramrisch is the Moravian-Austrian art historian of Buddhist and Hindu art who Sugata Ray looks to in his essay, “Art History and the Political Ecologies of Air.” In Kramrisch’s work on the representations of the Buddha’s body, Ray finds a decolonial impulse that counteracts colonialist and masculinist representations of breathing.

- The Editors

ART HISTORY AND THE POLITICAL ECOLOGIES OF AIR

Sugata Ray

Zyklon-B, a gassing agent utilized by Nazi Germany in Auschwitz; Agent Orange, a defoliant chemical used by the United States in Vietnam; glyphosate, a toxic herbicide aerially sprayed by the Israeli military along the borders of Gaza. The weaponization of air and breath through chemical warfare — “atmo-terrorism” in Peter Sloterdijk’s words — over the last hundred years or so has made it amply clear that the freedom to breathe “good” air is differentially arranged across the axes of empire, race, and capital.² If technofuturist gurus today dream of the privatization of breathable air via climate-controlled hermetic bubble neighborhoods, life — both human and nonhuman — in many parts of the Global South (and elsewhere) smothers under the tyranny of capitalism’s asymmetric toxic flows. It is under such oppressive circumstances, further amplified by the impasse of a global pandemic, that philosophers such as Achille Mbembe now conceive of another future of breathing as “a fundamental right to existence.”³ The recent demands to reclaim air as an indispensable “in-common, that which, by definition, *eludes all calculation*”⁴ has taken on a very particular valence in the aftermath of the *longue durée* history of the commodification of the atmosphere. This is, of course, a history that stretches from early modern seaborne settler and extractive colonialism to today’s neoliberal global capitalism, one that aspires to mutate the invisible gases that surrounds the earth into a tradeable commodity.

We may recall that the earth’s wind system had been subjugated by European cartographers, meteorologists, and geographers into an exploitable resource to buttress colonial expansionism from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Until the popularization of steam engines in the nineteenth century, wind was the key source of propulsion for sailingships, and Europe’s conquest of the earth’s wind system turned the atmosphere into a powerful instrument of colonial governance and revenue generation. Think, for instance, of the English astronomer Edmond Halley’s 1686 nautical diagram of the tropical trade winds, which is considered to be the first published meteorological chart (Figure 1).⁵ Even though traders and pilgrims had, for millennia, mobilized seasonal monsoon winds to travel across East Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, Halley’s chart based on data collected from ship logs became a tool for the East India Company’s empire-building project in the Indian Ocean region.⁶ A categorical purging of medieval cosmological conceptions of both wind and oceanic waters was critical for such early modern techno-rational data visualizations; the result was the production of an aerial space that could be exploited. Much like the transfiguration of oceanic space “from a commons into the property of the Western state”⁷ in this period, the secularization of air in Enlightenment thought and visual culture turned the atmosphere into a measurable natural resource that reinforced the global flow of imperialism and capital.

Yet, just as wind increasingly became a tactical resource that propelled Europe’s global sea-borne aspirations, air lost its power in Western philosophy. “The forgetting of air,” Luce Irigaray reminds us in her meditations on breathing, occurred in Western metaphysics as philosophers confronted the viscous weight of the earth as the ground for life and speech.⁸ Irigaray’s subsequent encounter with theories of breathing in Hindu treatises allowed the feminist scholar to further sharpen her critique.⁹ Despite naïve essentializations — and much has been penned about the philosopher’s adulation of the purported “masters of the East”¹⁰ — Irigaray’s reflections nevertheless take on great urgency in the context of our current crisis. We could say that the rationalist computations of post-Copernican imperial sciences that made air into a quantifiable



Figure 1. Edmond Halley, *A Map of the Global Trade Winds*, n.d. Published in Edmond Halley “An Historical Account of the Trade Winds, and Monsoons, observable in the Seas between and near the Tropicks, with an attempt to assign the physical cause of the said winds,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 16 (1686): 153 – 68. Public Domain.



Figure 2. *Standing Buddha from Sarnath*, 476/477 CE. Sandstone, 200 cm (height). Repository: Archaeological Museum, Sarnath, Public Domain.



Figure 3. *Seated Buddha from Bodhgaya*, ca. 384 CE. Sandstone, 117.5 cm (height). Repository: Indian Museum, Kolkata. Artwork in Public Domain.

commodity has failed us. Perhaps Irigaray sensed this failure. Moreover, her interest in yoga and breathing was not facile; *prana* — usually translated as vital breath or life force — offered the feminist scholar the possibility of envisioning the breathing body beyond Europe’s phallogocentrism.

From within art history, the idea of *prana* has its own trajectories, which are embedded within early twentieth-century anticolonial discourses.¹¹ The concept of *prana*, of course, precedes the birth of the discipline of art history in colonial India. In early philosophical and liturgical treatises such as the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (ca. seventh or sixth-century BCE), *prana* had been extolled as the life force that animates the human body and the whole universe. In later texts on Yoga, Ayurveda, and Tantra, the term — etymologically suggesting a forward activity — also became associated with breathing and breathing exercises as activities of the heart, mouth, and nose.¹² And it was in the early twentieth century that the term entered art history with the Moravian-Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch’s contention that yogic breathing practices, based on moving breath or *prana* along the internal channels of the body, played a significant role in visualizing the idealized body in Indian sculpture. In a 1931 essay, *Die figurale Plastik der Guptazeit* (followed by the more celebrated 1933 monograph *Indian Sculpture*), Kramrisch proposed that the movement from the corporeal physicality of second- and third-century Buddhist sculpture to the sensuous ethereality of fifth-century sculpture was a result of yogic breathing (Figures 2 and 3).¹³ In this seminal text — one that would subsequently define the historiography of Buddhist art history — Kramrisch read the male body as nature itself. Describing a 476/477 CE sandstone sculpture of the Buddha as a “supple, delicate vessel of rarified, superhuman bliss,”¹⁴ Kramrisch compared the late fifth-century body typology that had evolved in the Sarnath region in north India to earlier Buddhist sculptures to suggest that the taut corporeality of early Buddhist imagery was superseded in the late fifth century by a new physical form that gave life breath or *prana* to the Buddha’s body.

The slender body of late fifth-century Buddhist figures was, according to Kramrisch, an effect of transubstantiation that resulted as the vegetal, or nature, migrated into the male body. Unlike earlier Buddhist sculptures, the late fifth-century Sarnath Buddha was thus not merely an image of a corporeal male being. Rather, as a visualization of an embodied philosophy of the movement of air and life, the body was the “without when transferred into the within becomes identical there with the beyond.”¹⁵ Decentering the hypermasculine male body that had been naturalized in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, Kramrisch explored an art history that did not measure the sculpted form in phallogocentric terms. Even though recent scholarship has suggested that the earliest datable evidence of the *sukmasarira* practice — that is, practices based on moving breath or *prana* along the internal channels of the body — appeared only in the seventh or the eighth centuries, Kramrisch’s imagination of the Buddha’s body as nature itself had a specific and undeniably inventive resonance in the canons of art history.¹⁶

A Jewish émigré with a doctoral dissertation on early Buddhist art from the University of Vienna, Kramrisch was well aware of late nineteenth-century fetishizations of the hypermasculine male body in Europe and its subsequent misappropriation in Nazi Germany.¹⁷ In 1921, the year Adolf Hitler was confirmed as chairman of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, Kramrisch had migrated to India to teach art history at the poet Rabindranath Tagore’s school in Santiniketan. Although Kramrisch had escaped from Europe almost two decades before Zyklon-B gassings were carried out at Auschwitz, she would have undoubtedly been acquainted with the cult of the hypermasculine male body in interwar Germany that glorified classical Greek ideals of male virility. Hans Surén — a German military officer who joined the Nazi Party in 1933 — had, for instance, published in 1926 a wildly-popular book, *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (*Man and Sunlight*), that conjoined nudity and exposure to air and sunlight as essential to the well-being of the Volk.¹⁸ Surén, as scholars have noted, “was fascinated by the classical body of Ancient Greece and his efforts to retrieve this ‘lost’ physicality (as depicted by classical sculpture) resonate throughout *Man and Sunlight*.”¹⁹ A potent concoction of *Nachtkultur* or naked culture, the atmosphere’s therapeutic properties, and the purported beauty of classical Greco-Roman sculpture underwrote Surén’s expositions. This is perhaps best illustrated in the cover of *Der Mensch und die Sonne*, where we see the painting of a nude



Figure 4. Hans Surén, *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (Stuttgart: Dieck & Co., 1925). Public Domain.



Figure 5. *Standing Buddha from Gandhara*, 3rd century CE. Schist, 92.7 cm (height). Repository: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Denise and Andrew Saul Gift, in honor of Maxwell K. Hearn, 2014. Artwork in Public Domain.

muscular man, probably the author himself, turning toward the sun (Figure 4). From Surén's eccentric propositions in the mid-1920s to the Nazi usurpation of the Greco-Roman past in the 1930s, it was a direct course. This, on the one hand.

On the other hand, Kramrisch, a strong supporter of India's anti-colonial nationalist movement, had to contend with the idealization of "Greco-Buddhist" sculptures from the Gandhara region in northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan in colonial art history, archaeology, and Indology (Figure 5). European archeologists such as James Fergusson and Alfred C. A. Foucher had proposed that the origin of the Buddha image "was the consequence of India being brought into contact with the Western world," and that the task of the scholar was to unravel how "the arts of the Western world exerted their influence on those of the East."²⁰ The colonial tenor of such an endeavor was evident; the aim was to underwrite the first burst of largescale art production in the subcontinent as a derivative discourse rather than the product of a cosmopolitan global trade that connected the Mediterranean world to East Asia. It is in this intersecting milieu of the celebration of the Hellenic male body in both Weimar Germany and imperial art history that Kramrisch turned to precolonial philosophies of breathing to visualize the transcendent body in the colony. By underscoring the significance of the visualization of breathing practices in shaping figural representations of the Buddha's body, Kramrisch argued that the "toughness of the body" of early Buddhist sculpture had been distilled to its "purest plastic essence" by the fifth-century in north India.²¹ The move away from the Gandhara Buddha's markedly muscular body in the fifth century, Kramrisch claimed, occurred because of an awareness of bodily modulations achieved through yogic breathing. Her aim was to sever art history in the colony from imperial superlatives of the purportedly flawless European body, itself imagined through fictive homologies with classical Greco-Roman sculpture.

Today, propelled by the uneven distribution of resources and the immense violence of neocolonial corporations and states, thinking through the political ecology of air and breathing has accrued a different urgency. It is within this context that Kramrisch's mediations too gather new texture: the imagined intimacy between yogic practices and the aesthetics of the sculpted body makes visible how the act of breathing became a locus of political struggle in the early twentieth-century, in turn linking art history to struggles over subjectivity and agency. The decolonizing impulses that Stella Kramrisch, among others, bring to bear on art history then allows for a reimagination of sovereignty as breath. In the process, air becomes both a genealogy and a methodology to deracinate the Eurocentrism that still haunts our discipline today.

NOTES

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).
2. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, an Air Quality Index value of 50 "represents good air quality with little or no potential to affect public health." United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Air Quality Index: A Guide to Air Quality and Your Health* (Research Triangle Park, NC: U.S. EPA Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards, 2014), 2.
3. Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe," *Critical Inquiry: Posts from the Pandemic*, April 13, 2020. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/>, accessed September 1, 2020.
4. Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe." My Emphasis.
5. The chart was published in Edmond Halley, "An Historical Account of the Trade Winds, and Monsoons, observable in the Seas between and near the Tropicks, with an attempt to assign the physical cause of the said winds," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 16 (1686): 153–68. For Halley's work, see Alan H. Cook, *Edmond Halley: Charting the Heavens and the Seas* (New York: Clarendon, 1998), among others.
6. Much has been written on the history of precolonial Indian Ocean trade and monsoon. See, for instance, Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
7. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Sea and the Land: Biopower and Visuality from Slavery to Katrina," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50, nos. 2–3 (2009): 292.
8. Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary B. Mader (London: Athlone, 1999).

9. Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. Stephen Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
10. Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 7. For critiques, see, for instance, Penelope Deutscher, "Irigaray's *Between East and West* and the Politics of 'Cultural Ingénuité,'" *Theory, Culture and Society* 20 (2003): 65–75.
11. An expanded version of the arguments presented here is published in Sugata Ray, "The 'Effeminate' Buddha, the Yogic Male Body, and the Ecologies of Art History in Colonial India," *Art History* 38, no. 5 (November 2015): 916–39.
12. See James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin, 2017) and David G. White, *Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), among others, for this history.
13. Stella Kramrisch, "Die figurale Plastik der Guptazeit," *Wiener Beiträge zur Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Asiens* 5 (1931): 15–39. Alan Shapiro translated the essay into English with further revisions by Kramrisch. The notes in this essay refer to the 1983 reprint. Stella Kramrisch, "Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period," in Barbara S. Miller, ed. *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 181–203. Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).
14. Kramrisch, "Figural Sculpture," 192.
15. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, 55.
16. Scholars discuss the *Hevajra Tantra*, perhaps dating from the late eighth or the ninth century in its present form, as one of the first Buddhist texts to describe these practices. See David N. Lorenzen, "Early Evidence for Tantric Religion," in Katherine A. Harper and Robert L. Brown, eds. *The Roots of Tantra* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 25–36 and Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2008), among others.
17. The late nineteenth-century European invention of a new idealized male body based on classical Greco-Roman sculpture is discussed in Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-siècle France* (London, London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), especially Chapter Two and David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For Nazi appropriations, see Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016) and Karl E. Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture 1910–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), among others.
18. Hans Surén, *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (Stuttgart: Dieck & Co., 1925). The book went through sixty-one printings in one year and sold 250,000 copies.
19. Nina J. Morriss, "Naked in Nature: Naturism, Nature, and the Senses in Early 20th Century Britain," *Cultural Geographies* 16 (2009): 296.
20. James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1876), 48. Although European scholars such as Gottlieb W. Leitner had described Buddhist sculptures from Gandhara as "Graeco-Buddhist" in the 1870s, it was Alfred C. A. Foucher who most strongly advocated the Hellenic origin of Gandhara Buddhist sculpture. See Gottlieb W. Leitner, "Graeco-Buddhistic Sculpture," *Asiatic Quarterly Review* 7, nos. 13/14 (1894): 186–9 and Alfred C. A. Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art And Other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology*, trans. L. A. Thomas and F. W. Thomas (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1917).
21. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, 65–6. Along with Kramrisch's interventions, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's 1927 *Art Bulletin* essay on the origin of the Buddha image, among his other writings, lucidly denounced the colonialist tenor of earlier European art history that had posited the Gandhara region as the crucible where contact with the Hellenic world had led to the visualization of the Buddha's body. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *Art Bulletin* 4 (June 1927): 287–329.

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