

# AIR AND SPACE IN ART



Marinus Boezem, 'Signing the Sky above the port of Amsterdam by an Aeroplane', 1969, courtesy the artist.

by Julia Mullié

The launch of the Sputnik I satellite in 1957 marks the beginning of a space race between the Soviet Union and the United States. Who would be first to orbit the earth, launch a human into space, or eventually put a man on the Moon?

The course of the twentieth century is not only shaped largely by secularization and the process of decolonization but also by technological advances. An important question has become the individual's relationship to the changing world. Rapid technological developments in space travel and natural science receive considerable media attention.

It comes as no surprise that artists turn to using air and space as new materials in the creation of their work. From what perspective did a new generation of artists react to these breakthroughs? Did they draw on new scientific knowledge or utilize their senses? This essay discusses work by the Eventstructure Research Group, Marinus Boezem, and Stanley Brouwn, which is included in the exhibition Amsterdam, the Magic Center. Their work is placed within a broader context to demonstrate the appropriation of air and space as artistic materials, both inside and outside the walls of the museum.

## Space exploration, architecture, and philosophy

Space exploration plays a major role in everyday life at a particularly fascinating juncture, writes Geert Buelens, Professor of Modern Dutch Literature: "That space travel took such giant steps in the same years in which decolonization took place is intriguing. [...] Outwardly, it seemed entirely concerned with science and civilization, but in fact barely disguised a hidden drive—to possess and dominate." [i] He calls another conceivable motive "a guilt-ridden endeavor, beyond Earth, to compensate for the mess humans had made of their own planet."

Looking at the designs by architectural collectives Haus-Rucker-Co, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and Archizoom, all established in the late 1960s, one is immediately struck by the way air is used as a material to create protective, organic forms that isolate the individual from the outside world. It seems to reflect a vision of a better future, "makeable, mobile, light, and free from authorities." The philosophy of the '60s also shows a renewed interest in the question of how the individual relates to their environment. Following the death of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in 1961, interest in his seminal work *Phenomenology of Perception* is reignited when it is translated into English in 1963. Merleau-Ponty posits that the human body is the primary means of knowing the world. The use of air and space as artistic material can be traced back to two points that at first seem paradoxical: the desire for sensory, physical experiences, on one hand, and the more ideological progressive optimism based on scientific advancement, on the other.

### The Eventstructure Research Group

The Eventstructure Research Group was founded in 1968 by artists Jeffrey Shaw, Theo Botschuijver, and Sean Wellesley-Miller. The previous year, several members had worked on events that clearly anticipated what the group would do next. For example, Corpocinema was performed in 1967; first in Rotterdam, by Theo Botschuijver and Jeffrey Shaw, and then two months later in Amsterdam, with Sean Wellesley-Miller. In happenings and actions such as the Corpocinema, the collective sought out the boundaries of cinema by testing the traditional, one-sided relationship between audience and screen. From the moment the Eventstructure Research Group is established, the group strives to “break through the conditioning in the general pattern of experience and behavior, for example, in the first years of its existence by applying surprise elements in everyday situations, for example, on the street.” The name of the collective echoes a trend in which artists present themselves as institutions; for instance, Pieter Engels’s E.P.O. (English Product Organization) and the I.I.v.H.v.K. (International Institute for Retraining Artists, founded by Reinier Lucassen, Jan Dibbets, and Ger van Elk), about which Wim Beeren wrote, “These functions and names are alternatively fictitious or wholly businesslike. They all illustrate a situation in which the artists have turned their backs on the specialist official institutes and address their audience directly.”

The Corpocinema was an inflatable dome made of transparent plastic, five meters high and seven meters wide, onto which a film was projected. Because the dome was not under constant tension, the surface pulsed. Colored powders, foam, and water were used to spray the interior space of the dome while images were projected onto the exterior. A variety of films was screened, including a “visual account of the origins of aviation.” This film was made by Jeffrey Shaw in collaboration with Tjebbe van Tijen, who was also the initiator and coordinator of the Sigma Center, which performed the Corpocinema in the context of its Sigma Projects. The first time the Corpocinema was realized was on August 24, 1967, the same day the Continuous Drawing (1967) project, one of the Sigma Projects of Tjebbe van Tijen, arrived in Rotterdam. Parts of the drawing were projected onto the Corpocinema, “so that the drawing, as it were, goes up in smoke.”

In 1969 the Eventstructure Research Group performs 6 Events in Amsterdam, unannounced. Similar to the Corpocinema, these involve inflatable objects that people can enter and play within. The first two events are performed on September 17 on Frederiksplein. Something known as the Pneutube is on view, too: a sixty-meter-long transparent tube filled with air, containing a smaller yellow tube, also inflated with air. The small tube is used as a seating area.

A few days later at Slotterplas, an artificial lake, the Waterwalk can be seen (and experienced): a four-sided pyramid made of plastic, floating on the water. Two people climb inside the tetrahedron and the opening is closed by a waterproof zipper. Now, sealed inside, they are able to walk across the lake.

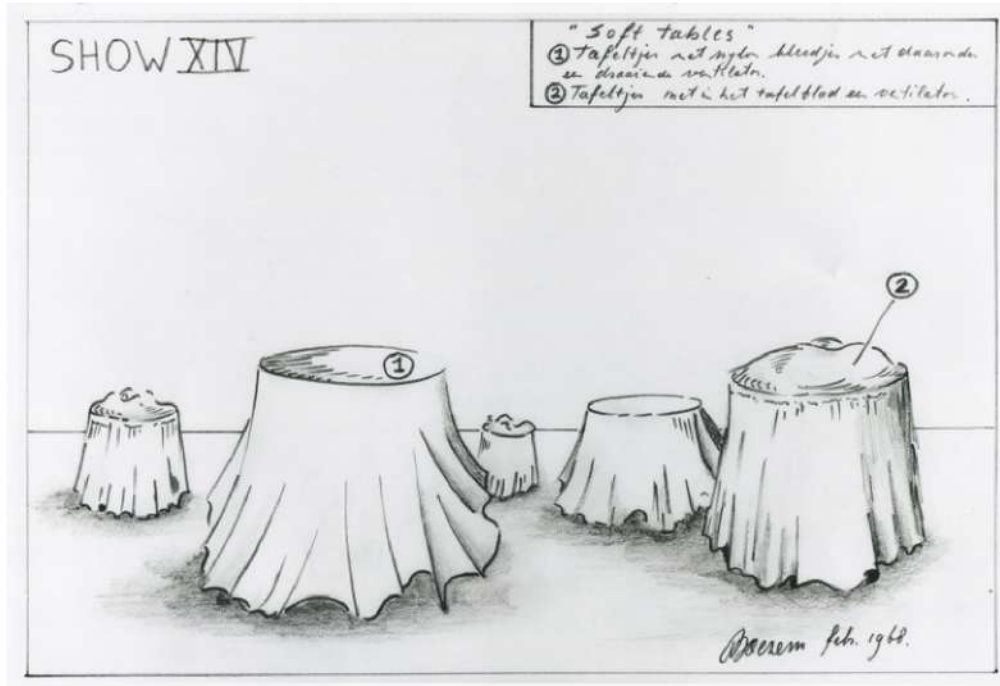
On September 22, the last two events take place on Museumplein, including the Brickhill: an inflatable plastic hill with a brick pattern printed on the exterior. Because the Brickhill is not fully inflated, it is more like a bouncy castle.

According to Theo Botschuijver, the objects were bound by one condition: “It must remain play, and cannot be turned into something commercial [...]” The aim of the Eventstructure Research Group was to surprise people, in which sense they capitalized on developments in art and society.



Eventstructure Research Group, 'Waterwalk', Six Events in Amsterdam, Slotterplas, Amsterdam, Netherlands (Photo: Pieter Boersma)





Marinus Boezem, show 14, 'Soft tables', design, 1968, , courtesy the artist.

### Marinus Boezem

From the moment that Marinus Boezem (1934) started his so-called Shows in 1964, air and space became recurring materials in his work.<sup>14</sup> As art historian Edna van Duyn observes, Boezem uses air "not only as material in itself, but more generally, as an experience of a spatial ideal and, in a metaphorical sense, as freedom and purification."<sup>15</sup> Boezem made his Shows between 1964 and 1969, based on the idea that, for an artist, it was no longer relevant to have "an attic full of canvases."

For this reason, he decides to perform an artwork only when someone demands it. According to Boezem, "Every month I sent one show to people who worked in the visual arts.

According to Boezem, "Every month I sent one show to people who worked in the visual arts. They were then able to order a work of art based on these 'silly' comic strips. Several Shows were realized later." Take, for example, Show XV Soft Room (1968), in which a room is filled with lightweight tables spread with tablecloths that undulate in the airflow produced by moving fans. "A swirling, transparent cloth continuously takes on a changing spatial appearance in fluid motion. Space is not primarily presented here as an object with fixed boundaries, but as content: the air. The tablecloths are the medium through which the immaterial air can manifest itself as a variable aspect of space," says Boezem. A slightly different application of air can be found in Show V Immaterial Sculpture (1965). The accompanying typescript emphasizes the intended sensory experience:

"Various air doors through which one can walk are installed in this show. This offers the sensory experience of warmth, air, and cold. See technique used by revolving doors in department stores. Boezem 1965."



Marinus Boezem, 'Linen Cloth Hanging Out of the Windows of the Stedelijk Museum', 1969. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam



Marinus Boezem, 'Signing the Sky above the port of Amsterdam by an Aeroplane', 1969, courtesy the artist.

The Shows form an important starting point for Boezem's intervention *Bedsheets hanging from the windows of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam* (1969). During the exhibition *Op losse schroeven: situaties en cryptostructuren* (1969) at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, sheets and pillows were hung from the windows of the museum's facade. It was a way to "bring a breath of fresh air into the museum." The work is not simply a comment on the obsolescence of the museum; the sheets also act as a medium to materialize the immaterial air. The work was recreated for the exhibition *Amsterdam, the Magic Center*.

In 1969 Boezem realized his work *Signing the Sky above the Port of Amsterdam with an Aeroplane*, for which an advertising airplane's vapor trail spelled out his name. The piece seems to be an allusion to the question of who actually owns the sky. At the same time, it is a response to the new possibilities that accompany lofty ambitions.

In the installation *Weather Drawings* (1969), scientific knowledge unites with the sensory and volatile. During *Op losse schroeven*, Boezem projects maps of the day's weather (possible thanks to satellites), accompanied by the voice of the weather man reading the weather reports aloud. He also exhibits the Beaufort Wind Scale, which gives an indication of how different wind speeds will affect the human environment. Boezem explains, "The scale is structured as follows: the first column shows the Beaufort number. The following shows the wind speed per minute. Accompanied by the classification 'calm,' 'moderate,' or 'hurricane.' And, last of all, a picture is included to show what it looks like. That was a major step for me: realizing you don't need to draw something with an elegant line to make it look like a tree, that everything has its own logo. And a 'logo' in the original meaning: the sign. So we know: 'that is that.'"



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