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Title:	HORROR VACUI: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF AIR AROUND 1900
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Keywords:	Aby Warburg (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Aby+Warburg) Fluids (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Fluids) Occult Photography (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Occult+Photography) Rainer Maria Rilke (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Rainer+Maria+Rilke) Rudolf Laban (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Rudolf+Laban) Space (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Space)
Subjects:	Germanic literature (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Germanic+literature) Art history (/jspui/browse?type=subject&value=Art+history)
Issue Date:	2012
Publisher:	Princeton, NJ : Princeton University
Abstract:	The dissertation examines aesthetic, scientific and occult evocations of fluids such as air at the turn of the 20th century. Eighteenth century experimental philosophy postulated so-called "imponderable fluids" understood as instances of a subtle matter that fills empty space. The dissertation traces the afterlife of the eighteenth century physics of fluids in cultural discourses in the period around 1900. It focuses on air - a quintessential fluid - in its various embodiments as a space-pervading substance ranging from wind and atmosphere to ether and effluvia. As elusive medial phenomena, localized between physics, metaphysics, and parapsychics, fluids can only be described from the perspective of different disciplines simultaneously. Furthermore, as liminal phenomena, their strongest manifestation is to be found at the interface of different media. I study the art historical writings of Aby Warburg; photographs of fluids by occult experimenters; the dance theoretical texts of Rudolf Laban; and the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke - to analyze fluids as medial, aesthetic, and epistemic objects. At stake in all of these evocations of fluids is not only the attempt to visualize an invisible medium but also the endeavor to picture in its movements the entwinement of motion and emotion. More importantly, however, fluids share a remarkable medial status: I argue that they reveal the intersections between the media-theoretical notion of medium and the biological concept of milieu and Umwelt at the turn of the 20th century. In addition, situated between thing and medium, they serve as an ideal site for an analysis of the entwinement between objects of knowledge and their means of knowing. I contend that evocations of fluids such as air localize the attempt to engage the empirical sciences for phenomena that evade the grasp of science. They belong to a cognitive borderland that unites the discourse of science with elusive objects of the non-empirical and points, thereby, to human engagements with epistemological limits.
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