

Steven Lauritano, *Haus-Rucker-Co, the Love Protectors: Inner Space Explorations in a Media Universe*, October 22, 2008, excerpt published in *Pidgin Magazine*, Issue 6, 2008, p. 70-79.

Haus-Rucker-Co, the Love Protectors:

Inner Space Explorations in a Media Universe

Introduction: TV Bubbles

They make an odd couple, the inflatable pod and the television set. One the epitome of transparency, flexibility, mobility - literally light as air. The other heavy, boxy, tethered to an electrical socket via power cord. Yet in spite of these antithetical qualities, the TV and bubble forged a special bond in the architectural visions of the late 1960s Neo-Avant-garde. Take for example Francois Dallegret's illustration of an "Environmental Bubble" for Reyner Banham's 1965 text, "A Home is not a House."ⁱ Occupying the heart of an air-filled membrane, the television monitor is the central prop in a scene that recreates the primordial origins of architecture. Here, the naked occupants gather round a technological hearth - not for warmth - but for a form of sustenance offered through media. Don't be fooled by the bubble, it is the media console which constitutes the actual architecture, acting as the primary player in the creation of space. As the television screen with its accompanying assembly of gadgets dominates the interior, one has to wonder if the membrane is there to protect the human beings or the machinery's own sensitive circuitry?

Michael Webb's 1966 *Cushicle* and Wolf Prix's 1967 *Intensiv- Box* add built-in furniture to the TV-bubble equation. In each case, the specific shape and placement of the seating element forces an unusually intimate connection between human inhabitant and media screen. Suspended directly in front of the headrest, the black monitor in Webb's *Cushicle* eclipses the occupant's field of vision. Prix's built-in chair positions the inhabitant across from a screen, placed precisely at eye level. In his sectional drawing

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the bubble itself evokes a human inhabited eyeball. The television screen stands in for the pupil as the light emitting entity. Replacement of natural vision with media-vision is symptomatic of both projects. Congenital vision gives way to the logic of the monitor. Reflecting a similar attitude, the television set in Ant Farm's 1973 *House of the Century*ⁱⁱ emerges from the wall to occupy the space in front of a large circular window. Here, the screen supplants views of the natural surroundings, broadcasting images from a more diverse and far reaching media landscape. More than a technological hearth, the TV monitor inside *House of the Century* acts as communication beacon, the primary link to an outer-world.

Collectively, these television-bubble projects indicate two competing preoccupations: an enthusiasm for technology and a growing ecological anxiety. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, widespread faith in technical progress and the increasing ability to connect humans across the globe often clashed with concerns related to pollution, acid rain, harsh weather and the disappearing Ozone layer. In this dual-context the inflatable emerged as a new typology, protective and lightweight, a habitat portable enough to facilitate the return to a nomadic lifestyle necessitated by the search for limited natural resources. Yet the examples cited thus far seem to prioritize the technology, sacrificing the lightness, mobility and/or transparency of the inflatable membrane in order to accommodate the television screens inside.ⁱⁱⁱ To this end, the plastic membrane along with its accompanying ecological rhetoric becomes a kind of distracting veil, a thin shroud hiding a grim forecast of the future, a world where the technological-media complex exerts its dominance over the human race.

Faced with this conundrum, a group of Viennese artists known as Haus-Rucker-Co found a way to reformulate the question of the bubble and the TV, enabling them to maintain a critical stance in relation to mass media and its delivery mechanisms. Beginning in 1967 with two entries for the Holzäpfel Interdesign 2000 furniture competition^{iv}, Haus-Rucker-Co created a series of inflatable projects linked to a simple proposition: what if the protective qualities of the plastic skin are necessitated not by ecological concerns, but

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by the new environment created through mass-media and its accompanying gadgets . . . Do we need bubbles to protect us from TV?

Part 1 : Mind Expansion (in the comfort of your own home!)

A photograph taken at Haus-Rucker-Co's 1970 exhibit "Live" shows Günter Zamp Kelp sitting on a floral-clad sofa in the main gallery of Vienna's Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts. As he reads the latest issue of *LIFE* magazine, a giant red-spotted, shiny-yellow balloon-creature hovers over his shoulder.^v It is the *Gelbes Herz*, one of the pneumatic projects he created for the show along with fellow Haus-Rucker-Co members Laurids Ortner and Klaus Pinter. Simultaneously, the black boxy silhouette of a TV monitor peeks out from behind his head. Domestic furniture, television sets and inflatable artwork share the exhibition floor; a somewhat enigmatic, but by no means arbitrary, conflation of objects.

Prior to this formal exhibit, Haus-Rucker-Co's balloon capsules had been inflated in far less "serious" surroundings: apartments, public parks, places which invited a hands-on engagement. In contrast, the sterile, minimal surroundings of the gallery threatened to drain the vitality from the work, transforming the projects into sculptures, static objects not to be touched. When confronted with the museum space, the artists chose to add an additional set of contextual objects comprised of furniture from their own apartments. They transported bed rooms and living rooms (televisions included) to the museum and moved into the commandeered gallery space for the duration of the show.^{vi} The plan drawn up for the exhibition indicates a location for each of the inflatable projects and designates three distinct spaces to serve as the artists "rooms". Included in each room, a small rectangular box stipulates the precise location for a television monitor; an indication that the artists considered the media device to be an integral part of the exhibit.

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The televisions in the photographs from "Live" have a distinctly different look from those included in the projects discussed previously. Haus-Rucker-Co's TVs are bigger, boxier and generic. Devoid of futuristic styling, they look old, dated even for the year 1970. More importantly, the monitors are not located inside the inflatables, but occupy an adjacent space. In this case, the coexistence of TVs and balloons seems less an articulation of the utopian vision for a distant future and more of an attempt by the artists to comment on contemporary conditions. What the photographs from "Live" fail to reveal is the more menacing role played by the televisions as components in a closed-circuit surveillance system. Visitors, before entering the gallery space, were forced to proceed up a ramp into the dark confines of the "Schwarzer Kubus" or Black Cube. Here, a hidden camera captured the ordeal, distributing the live feed to the televisions scattered throughout the gallery. After being trapped momentarily in the box, visitors soon discover that the uncomfortable experience was broadcast to the other museum-goers.^{vii} The surveillance system casts a shadow over the rest of the show. People begin to wonder if there are other cameras? Are the artists watching as they react to the work?

In the "Live" exhibition the use of surveillance and the inclusion of transplanted household furniture might be described in the words of Haus-Rucker-Co as attempts "to nourish a feeling of foreignness, to seek this feeling out time and time again, this is the most important principle . . . where hominess and acquiescence spread, we are threatened the most acutely. All forms of home and homeland carry in them the virus of nationalist convictions."^{viii} The anxiety expressed here for domestic space naturally extends to its objects and especially its new hearth: the TV. Aware of mass-media's inherent dangers and propagandistic undertones, Haus-Rucker-Co sought to create a scenario in which the television could maintain its accepted position within the cultural sphere, to continue functioning as an integral part of the domestic space, but enable the users to maintain some kind of

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critical distance and awareness of its potentially damaging effects. For the artists themselves, this "critical distance" was achieved in part through the relocation of their own domestic spaces within the foreign context of the museum. A feeling of uncomfortable alienation may have been the desired outcome of the artists' living experiment, but the photographs tell a different story. Zamp Kelp and his family members appear completely at ease in their transplanted home, casually complacent in the environment populated with stuffed sofas, televisions and inhabitable balloon capsules. It is in fact the museum-goer who looks out of place as he stands there awkwardly scratching his head, not knowing exactly where to look.

More effective at facilitating this critical distance from the television and the domestic space are the inflatables themselves; though located only a few meters from the living room furniture, the trip inside promises an entirely alien environment complete with unique sensory experiences. The once familiar surroundings inevitably take on a new quality when the journey is over and the occupants climb back out into the homescape. It is within the balloon that one appears capable of seeking out that feeling of foreignness which Haus-Rucker-Co prescribes "time and time again." And it is precisely through this ability to transport the inhabitant into a different mental space that the artists' balloon creations fulfill a protective roll. Rather than passively accepting the constant media barrage till one's mind is filled to the brim, users who spend time in the *Gelbes Herz* are promised a chance to reclaim their own psychological space. In this manner, the inflatables offer a form of mental, rather than physiological, protection.

In an interview with Torsten Schmiedeknecht, Günter Zamp Kelp describes this preservation of a certain imaginative and personal mental space in the face of media as a fundamental goal, not only of his group's projects, but of art in general. The comments grow out of his comparison between the role of television and Malevich's *Black Square*. Zamp Kelp explains how "the television projects its images onto me, whereas I can use the *Black Square* as

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a surface for the projection of my own thoughts and ideas.”^{ix} According to his formulation, televisions possess a certain power over individuals, a power which can be counteracted or neutralized through a daily engagement with art. One can think of Zamp Kelp’s comparison as a kind of 2-dimensional analog to the scenario enacted in the exhibition “Live”. The pervasiveness of television comes to dominate the exhibition space as it controls the inhabitants, populating their minds with thoughts, images and anxieties. The inflatables projects such as *Gelbes Herz* counteract this phenomenon. Going one step beyond Malevich’s square, the devices act not just a projection surfaces for the imagination, but as collection devices, interior pockets of space which facilitate, protect and collect the thoughts and images produced by the imagination of the person (or people) inside.

Such an ambition lies at the very heart of Haus-Rucker-Co’s *Mind Expanding Program*, a term used by the group to collectively describe five of their early bubble projects. The poster created by the artists to summarize these works includes a series of pictographs which depict the release and collection of psychic energies, a visual illustration of the process that will presumably occur within the inflatables. In a diagrammatic representation of *Gelbes Herz*, for example, concentric lines of energy radiate outwards from a human figure who seems to float in a transcendent, meditative state. Another pictograph represents the 1967 *Mind Expander*, a kind of bubble designed to fit over two users’ heads. Red energy beams shoot out from their grey silhouettes like psychological rays or super-charged currents of thought erupting from their brains. In this case the bubble acts as a kind of solar condenser for the imagination, reflecting and concentrating the beams until the entire space is saturated with mental energy.

In keeping with the pseudo-scientific nature of their diagrams, Haus-Rucker-Co coined the abbreviation PHY-PSY to describe the intended sphere of action for the devices in the *Mind Expanding Program*. This play on the term “sci-fi” expresses the desired effect of the balloons on both physical and psychological faculties. Though their work may be tangentially related to

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science fiction, the artists distinguish their efforts from those of futurists or other artists interested in imaginary utopias by rooting the work in the perceptive realm. Not quite scientific, but definitively non-fictitious, the inflatables of the *Mind Expanding Program* are designed for contemporary users and intended to produce very real effects, not only on the imagination, but on the sensory apparatus as well. Consider this text from the group's 1968 PHY-PSY exhibition catalogue:

The technological accomplishments of our age have advanced so far beyond our mental and physical development . . . to further develop the physical-psychical faculties - is an absolute necessity. PHY-PSY is a kind of astronaut program, with the goal of conquering the Inner-Space, the space in man himself. [We seek] the development of optical approaches and the creation of environments which act as a kind of fertilizer for these new developments.^x

As suggested by this excerpt, it would be misleading to cast Haus-Rucker-Co as a collective of anti-television or anti-technology artists. By expressing the problem as a need for humans to "catch up" to technology, they recognize the importance of technical innovation while simultaneously acknowledging that a failure to act will result in unhealthy dependency.

In a world where optic and acoustic information is delivered directly via screen and headphones, the user becomes a passive receiver rather than an active listener and viewer. In such a scenario, might the sense organs atrophy? The *Mind Expanding Program* was conceived as a means of counteracting this mind contraction, the psychological symptoms one develops when passively accepting the everyday stream of media.^{xi} Haus-Rucker-Co's solutions accept the Modernist myth of programmatic determinacy, optimistically crediting space with transformative powers far beyond the intended effects of which their socially conscious architectural predecessors dreamed. In this sense, the *Mind Expanding Program* represents an attempt to design environments which will influence not only the users' actions, but their psychological and physical faculties as well - a re-programming of body and mind.

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Integral to the functioning of these corrective/protective devices are the "optical approaches" mentioned in the PHY-PSY excerpt. Though they appear somewhat decorative, the psychedelic patterns which adorn the surfaces of the inflatable projects in the *Mind Expanding Program* represent another means of achieving Haus-Rucker-Co's desired transformative effects.^{xii} Klaus Pinter, a painter by training, is primarily responsible for the distinctive patterns which appear to be a continuation of his earlier work, most notably a series of *Rundbilder* (Round Paintings) executed before he joined the group. The *Rundbilder* projects, though called paintings, are really individual installations which completely enclose the viewer in a 360° panorama. The immersive surface, covered with simple abstract figures on a white background, transports the viewer into a new environment (within the gallery walls). In this sense the paintings appear to be the early ancestors to later projects such as *Gelbes Herz* or the *Mind Expander*.

In comparison to his earlier projects, Pinter's painted additions to the skin of the inflatables take a more decorative and linear direction. Almost like space-age re-imaginings of certain Viennese Secessionist patterns, the markings share an affinity with the surface treatment of Otto Wagner's *Majolica House* (1889-1890). More convincing perhaps is a comparison between Pinter's decorations and the patterns found on circuit boards, threads of conductive material which form a network of lines traversing a surface as they intermittently plug into resistors and capacitors.^{xiii} Though seemingly unrelated, both analogies are examples of patterns generated when lines are infused with a kind of energy. Similarly, one might think of Haus-Rucker-Co's decorated bubbles as household appliances with the wiring exposed. More than just paintings, the patterns constitute a kind of "psychic circuitry" - a means of tapping into the human brain. In Haus-Rucker-Co's own words, the "shapes develop aggressive energies that have a psychological and physical impact on man. The amount of energy increases with the size of the shape."^{xiv}

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This interest in establishing a more direct conduit with the mind was explored by other artists at the time, most often with a series of pseudo-scientific energy transmitting devices. Ant Farm's 1969 *Enviroman* project attempts to create a virtual architecture by feeding images of a "Howdy Doody future" directly into the brain. In the same year Coop Himmelblau completed a series of experimental projects in Vienna which used electric sensors to capture signals from the brain, the heart and other muscles (*Weisse Anzug, Soul-Flipper and Herzraum*).^{xv} In contrast to these devices, Haus-Rucker-Co's painted skins represent a less technical, but ultimately more direct and functional approach to the creation of a sensory therapy device; an apparatus in which the colors and shapes illicit conscious and perhaps subconscious reactions from the people inside as their senses become increasingly attuned.

In the name "Haus-Rucker-Co", it is the final syllable "Co" which is most important to the group's identity.^{xvi} More than a studio of architects or artists, the group functioned as a collective of inventors, a company with a product line composed of exercise machines for the faculties of perception. In 1967, before the "Live" Exhibition or the more fully developed *Mind Expanding Program*, the Haus-Rucker-Co members used a household vacuum cleaner to inflate a bubble in their first publically presented project *Ballon für Zwei*. Within this balloon they claimed that " you will think better . . . you will do everything better because you will be calmer, more relaxed. You can set up the balloon yourself at home. Next to the flower table or over by the television. It's not too challenging. You already have everything required . . ."^{xvii} More than the description of an art project, this quote reads as a sales pitch or the script for an infomercial. *Ballon für Zwei*, like the other projects in the *Mind Expanding Program*, is an object with a place in the home rather than a dwelling in and of itself - it is something you set up next to the TV. In Haus-Rucker-Co's world, television and bubble function as partner appliances. If TV transports you outside your living room, the inflatables

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transport you inside yourself. Within this specific framework, the marriage between bubble and television seems to make sense. One cannot survive without the other. Remove the *Mind Expander* and you risk developing a debilitating reliance on broadcast media. Live your life in the confines of a bubble and you risk the equally debilitating effects of isolation.

Part 2: Love is in the Air

Reacting to the stimuli-saturated, media -bombarded environment the members of Haus-Rucker-Co seem to target a particular category of human perception; In their spatial crusade against the modern subject's desensitization, the set of faculties related to love, sexuality and sensuality receive special attention. Evidence of this programmatic goal can be traced back to one of earliest projects, the 1967 *Mind-Expander*, one of the many Haus-Rucker-Co projects designed for two users. In addition to photographs of the project, which always show a young couple entangled in an amorous pose within the over-sized plastic helmet, the group's own written description clearly lays out the device's intended effects:

The chair has a seat contoured to fit the bodies of 2 people, a man and a woman. A PVC balloon extends over the heads of the seated couple. You help the girl climb in. Then it's your turn. The girl sits slightly higher in the seat with her legs draped over your right thigh. You pull the balloon down into position and adjust the timer. The beating heart rhythm of the timer is regular and calming. Your eyes follow the red and blue lines of the balloon. The air which you breath, flows slowly through your bodies. Your heart begins to beat more slowly. You have forgotten whether the girl is a blond or a brunette. Her legs are weightless, you don't even notice them. You don't even notice your skim, your arm, which has wrapped itself around her shoulder. It is simply there. You didn't even have to think about it.

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Totally deep and fluid. Everything begins to flow. The girl is in your breath and in your eyes. And then you only think about breathing. You feel as if you are being inhaled. Pink dots circle before your eyes. Your gaze wanders, but always in rhythm with the breathing, wandering over red and blue lines. The lines become a rhythm, the rhythm of your breathing. The circle begins to close itself. You are pleased with this. The journey has begun.^{xviii}

In this narrative, the *Mind Expander* is exposed as an aphrodisiacal environment, a form of spatial Viagra which promotes the artists' desired effects through unexpected means. Unlike many of the inflatable projects designed by Haus-Rucker-Co's contemporaries, the *Mind Expander* actually suppresses vision, allowing the occupants to experience a heightening of the other senses - with the notable exception of touch. Visual and haptic stimuli - the modes of perception most often associated with physical arousal - are purposefully downplayed. Faced with the abstract patterns of dots and lines, the user's eyes become distracted. The male user's vision is compromised; he can no longer remember the hair color of the girl in his lap. Likewise, her legs become "weightless" and his arm inadvertently wraps around her shoulders - a subconscious act. Simultaneously, the *Mind Expander* intensifies the senses of sound and smell as breathing becomes the main form of communion between occupants. Aided by the tick-tick-ticking of a built in timer, all other modes of perception succumb to the rhythm of synchronized respiration.

This interest in breathing and its accompanying effects represents yet another chapter in an already lengthy account of Modern architecture's long standing obsession with oxygen, fresh air and its host of benefits. From the cover of Sigfried Gideion's *Befreites Wohnen* with its refrain of Licht, Luft, Oeffnung, (Light, Air, Opening), to the prominent role of fresh air in Le Corbusier's own writings, to the importance of the Tuberculosis Sanatorium as a program for Modern architects (John Hejduk once quipped that architects

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lost their best program when tuberculosis was cured), to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Oxygen Cart*, or even the Smithsonian's *House of the Future* which Beatriz Colomina has interpreted as a lung in a box - the notion of fresh air habitually hovers over discussions of modern architecture until it becomes the building material of choice in the pneumatic architecture of the 1960s and 70s. In terms of the act of breathing one tends to associate these inflatable environments with cleansed air. The protective membrane filters out pollution and other invisible predators such as germs. In contrast to these attitudes, the air inside the *Mind-Expander* isn't clean at all - it is saturated completely by the two users. The couple becomes aware of a new kind of intimacy achieved with - and within their lungs. The breathing is sexually charged. Love is quite literally "in the air."

This interpretation runs counter to the perceived effect of inflatables. Georges Teyssot, for example, has described Haus-Rucker-Co's pneumatic balloons as "celibate machines" and "prophylactic devices suppressing contact."^{xix} But for Haus-Rucker-Co, the balloons function not as contraceptives, but as inceptives or incentives to acts of human intimacy. The *Mind-Expander* is just the first iteration in a series of projects that appear to promote a certain sexual closeness between users. Take for example the *Ballon für Zwei*. With the same frequency as the check-in schedule at an hourly rate motel, the balloon was re-inflated six times between 12.00 am and 6.00 pm on the first Wednesday of October in 1967. Each appearance lasted approximately 10 minutes and afforded "the opportunity for a [different] male/female couple to experience the surrounding urban environment through the tattooed, transparent membrane of the spherical balloon."^{xx} For at least one couple, the desired effect seems to have been achieved. The first two people to enter the balloon, ex-bassist Stoff Superhuber from the musical group Jack's Angles and a girl by the name of Maria Ebner, were engaged to be married by the time they exited the inflatable device.^{xxi}

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In the line of aphrodisiac machines, the 1968 project *Gelbes Herz* represents a further evolution. Instead of relying solely on the breathing of the occupants to generate the desired sensations, *Gelbes Herz* has the ability to breathe and pulsate along with its users: a motor attached to the balloon pumps bursts of air into the intermediate cavities, periodically constricting the inner space. When the air escapes the central cavity expands to its original size. As the cycle of contraction and expansion repeats, the users experience a throbbing rhythm. This ability to animate the inflatable and give it a life of its own was identified as Reyner Banham as one of the key advantages for pneumatic architecture. He writes:

This tendency to behave like living organism when roused is what I find missing in most accounts of the inflatable experience. Unlike conventional architecture which stands rigidly to attention and deteriorates . . . inflatables (and tents, to a lesser extent) move and are so nearly living and breathing that it is no surprise that they have to be fed (with amps, if not oats).^{xxii}

Banham's use of the word "roused" is particularly appropriate in regards to the *Gelbes Herz*, though in this case it is the human occupants who are roused by the inflatable creature. With its breathing and pulsations the device has an ability to tap into a universal language of sexual arousal.

The cycle of contraction and expansion has the added benefit of enhancing the optical effects created by the colorful patterns. Following an almost hypnotic rhythm, the markings transform from blurry patches into clear geometrical patterns - then back into fuzzy spots at the periphery of vision. This optical sequence, passing through stages of focus and blur, is not unlike a cinematic technique used by the director David Lynch to convey intense sexual sensations in a scene from his film *Mulholland Drive*. Accompanied by a soundtrack of heavy breathing, the camera stands in for the eyes of the character Diane as she experiences a cycle sexual stimulation. Her view of the room correspondingly shifts in and out of focus enacting a kind of visual orgasm. Though the optical effects produced within the expanding-contracting

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interior of *Gelbes Herz* are similar, the pulsations differ from Lynch's cinematic effect to the extent that they remain more in the realm of the subconscious, operating as a means to arousal rather than a metaphoric or visual representation of the sexual sensations themselves.

Haus-Rucker-Co's own descriptions of *Gelbes Herz's* reflect a desire for the transformative mechanisms to remain largely imperceptible. The artists make no mention of actual physical arousal, instead using words like "relaxation". *Gelbes Herz* is more brainwashing machine than vibrating bed. The same attitude applies to the *Ballon für Zwei* as described in the following passage:

Our balloon sponsors love. We create machines that promote and intensify the contact between two humans . . . our balloon helps you discover uncharted sensations of calmness, security, relaxation and love. We want to enhance your sensitivity. Help you make a journey. Together with someone who you love. In the Inner Space. Like astronauts . . . You will think better and love better . . . Haus-Rucker-Co the Love-Protector.^{xxiii}

Here, in addition to the comments on love, the references to astronauts are particularly interesting. Caught in the midst of the space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the artists frame the experience of the *Balloon für Zwei* in terms of an "Inner Space" journey, restoring the notion of mobility that was sacrificed in many of the inflatable projects by their contemporaries. Though the occupants of the *Balloon für Zwei* remain physically stationary, Haus-Rucker-Co hopes to provide the vehicle for a journey into areas of the mind and sensory apparatus that have yet to be explored. It is precisely the absence of television and the blocking out of all other distractions (along with the help of psychotropic drugs) that make this inner space journey possible.

The excerpt also raises the issues of security and protection, though not in response to ecological concerns as was the case with many of the contemporary bubble projects. Instead, the Haus-Rucker-Co text proclaims an

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explicit interest in preserving human faculties related to love – an interest the artists shared with a large segment of the population. In the late 1960s many people feared the effects of the suddenly over-abundant media on interpersonal and romantic relationships. In a special “landmark poll” conducted for *LIFE* magazine in 1971, two thirds of Americans complained that “television keeps family members from talking to each other.”^{xxiv} Echoing this sentiment a series of cartoons used to illustrate the accompanying article depict the particularly destructive nature of the television on the husband-wife dynamic. One of the cartoons, originally printed in a 1967 issue of the *Saturday Review*, depicts a woman perched on top of a TV as her husband, completely oblivious, stares transfixed into the screen. In an act of desperation she climbs on top of the monitor and attempts to physically compete with the television for her husband's attention, but even this technique appears ineffective. The illustration portrays precisely the kind of desensitization, communication break-down and general barrier to contact between two human beings that Haus-Rucker-Co hoped to remedy with their love protecting devices. As the inflatable spatial appliances exercise, restore and enhance the senses, they make it possible to fall in love or, be in love again.

Part 3 : Making Babies

The molded plastic seats designed by Haus-Rucker-Co for devices like the *Mind Expander*, the *Schalensitz*, or the *Recreation Environment Expander* do not immediately evoke comfort. A photograph of the *Schalensitz* without its human occupant offers few clues as to how the body should arrange itself in relation to the asymmetrical contours. The complexity of the shape can be explained by the fact that the seat, like most Haus-Rucker-Co devices, is designed for two users, more specifically, one man and one woman. Photographs of the *Mind Expanding* projects typically show a young attractive couple

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demonstrating the proper sitting position: The man is on the bottom with his arm around the woman; she sits to the side with her leg dangling in his lap, a highly specific and eroticized pose. While contemporary bubble projects by other artists used built in furniture elements to prescribe a specific relation between the user and the screen, Haus-Rucker-Co's devices force a very specific physical relation between the male and female users.

This overt heterosexuality, inherent in the work, is put on display in the artists' photo-documentation. This is the case for all of the *Mind Expanding Machines* as well as other projects such as the 1969 *Roomscrapper*, a kind of plastic panel featuring abstracted, almost robotic male and female figures depicted in relief. Functioning somewhere in the realm between a full-scale sex-education classroom aid and an erotic carnival game, the piece, which was sometimes installed over a bed, includes small red light bulbs in the genital areas and yellow lights around the thighs. Considering the suggestive nature of projects like *Roomscrapper* and the repeated documentation of young, healthy, heterosexual users, one could argue that the phrase "Love-Protectors" applies not only to the emotional sentiment of love, but an additional facet of the word related to fertility and human reproduction. In the photographs of the Haus-Rucker-Co balloon projects you rarely see a single user, or a mother and daughter entering the *Mind-Expander*. There are no pictures of an elderly couple relaxing in the *Ballon für Zwei*. This can be attributed in part to the age of the Haus-Rucker-Co artists and their circle of friends. Still, one must question whether the phrase "Love-Protector" might also reflect a view of technology as a threat to human reproduction.

More convincing perhaps in terms of the relationship between Haus-Rucker-Co's projects and human reproduction is a possible reading of the inflatables as creating womb-like spaces. The belief in a subconscious desire to recreate the safety and comfort of the pre-natal space served as a major theme in the work of several surrealist artists in the 1930's, especially

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Tristan Tzara who explains in his 1936 essay "Concerning a Certain Automatism of Taste":

A desire to return to the womb presides over our love for artworks: a feeling of emotional plentitude, of total, absolute, irrational comfort and of the absence of consciousness and responsibility . . . When we give back to man what was taken from him during adolescence, that which while still a child he was able to possess, the kingdoms of "luxe, calme et volupté" he built for himself under bedcovers, under tables, crouched in the earth's hollows, those above all with a narrow entry; when we realize that well-being resides in the chiaroscuro of prenatal desires, we will rebuild the circular and spherical and irregular houses whose memory man has preserved from the cave to the cradle and the tomb, in his vision of intrauterine life which is entirely innocent of the so-called modern aesthetic of castration.^{xxxv}

In addition to Haus-Rucker-Co's own spherical comfort pods, several of their contemporaries developed projects which revived the surrealist interest in attempted re-creations of intra-uterine space, most notably Niki de Saint-Phalle with her 1967 project *Hon Katedral (She Cathedral)*. Working with husband Jean Tinguely and the artist Per Olof Ultvedt, Saint-Phalle stretched fabric over a framework of steel, wood and chicken wire to build an inhabitable female sculpture. Upon entering the gallery at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden visitors encountered a gigantic woman covered in colorful symbols, lying on her back, legs spread apart. After passing through her vagina, visitors explored the interior of the giant female body beginning with the intra-uterine space. In comparison, the womb references in Haus-Rucker-Co's work are much less explicit, but in terms of material properties and scale, the group's environments with their soft flexible skins come closer to approximating the spatial effects of the intra-uterine world.

Another contemporary example, perhaps a bit closer to Haus-Rucker-Co's sphere of influence, is Kiesler's *Endless House*, the model of which was

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completed for MOMA in 1959. The enveloping folds of his house have often been described as womb-like and Kiesler repeatedly photographed himself within the model prompting psychoanalytic speculations about his desire to return to the comfort and protection of the womb. Related to this theme is Kiesler's own anecdote regarding his "discovery" of architecture. He claimed to have first encountered architecture at the age of 3 when he crawled under the long skirt of his Ukranian nanny and lit a match.^{xxvi} The members of Haus-Rucker-Co knew Kiesler's work both through their mentor Guenter Feuerstein and Kiesler's own ties to Vienna (he studied at the Vienesische Technische Hochschule like Ortner and Zamp Kelp as well as the Akademie der Bildenden Kuenste like Pinter). It is also likely that they saw his *Endless House* model during a 1964 trip to New York City organized by Feuerstein, though Ortner and Zamp Kelp apparently skipped a face to face meeting with Kiesler to rent a car and explore the city on their own.^{xxvii}

The best evidence of a connection between Haus-Rucker-Co and Friedrich Kiesler exists in the work itself where there are definite formal and thematic ties. With its organic folds and egg-shaped spaces, an early student project by Ortner is morphologically similar to the *Endless House*. Even more compelling, is a certain resonance between Kiesler's "Correalism" diagram and the rhetoric employed by Haus-Rucker-Co to explain their *Mind Expanding* devices.^{xxviii} Kiesler's bubble diagram includes a series of three overlapping circles labeled with icons and the letters H, N, T and M to signify the human environment, the natural environment, the technological environment, and man, the subject. Together, the circles are intended to express the dynamics of continuous interaction between man and his human, natural and technological surroundings. Conceptually, Haus-Rucker-Co's own bubbles insert themselves at the intersection of the three inner rings as domestic appliances designed to stimulate the perception of the natural environment and one's fellow humans. Alternatively, one could apply Haus-Rucker-Co's notion of the bubbles as transporters or inner-spaceships to the

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diagram. In this case the devices function as a means of temporarily severing the connection to the Technological circle, allowing the subject (M) to focus on the natural and human realms.

This second interpretation would seem to support the idea of the inflatable as a womb-like refuge. Several pieces of visual evidence linked to the group's own work suggest at least a peripheral interest in intrauterine space. A snapshot of Haus-Rucker-Co's own studio in Vienna, for example, contains a somewhat ambiguous image, which when enlarged, appears to depict a pregnant woman exposing her belly (nature's own version of the inhabited inflatable). A more explicit image of an expectant mother appears in a collage from 1970 by a group of students advised by Günther Zamp Kelp at the Technische Hochschule. Their work, titled "Metro", prominently features the swollen belly of a young and naked pregnant girl. As the bearer of new life, she and the child protected in the space of her womb represent the lone hopeful elements in a landscape that is otherwise chaotic and grim, full of bed-ridden invalids, severed limbs and a locomotive which seems to be crashing through all the turmoil (perhaps as a stand in for the unstoppable force of new technology).

Though no explicit references to the inflatable projects as womb spaces appear in the writings of Haus-Rucker-Co, Torsten Schmiedeknecht mentions a conversation in which Zamp Kelp described the group's balloon projects as having a distinctly motherly identity.^{xxix} Attempting to explain the powerful material properties of the devices, Zamp Kelp cites Harry Harlow's "Surrogate Mother" experiment from 1958. In this now famous procedure Harlow exposed a group of baby apes to two artificial mothers, each capable of supplying the young primates with milk. One of the dummies was made from wire and another was made with soft fabric. Even when the fabric mother did not provide food, the apes concentrated their attention on her. Zamp Kelp's reference lends some scientific credibility to the notion that the soft pneumatic skins have an innate motherly comfort, an idea which closely relates

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to the concept of womb as the ur-protective space, the soft padded hollow which envelops a human during its most vulnerable phase of life.

Haus-Rucker-Co's belief that the balloon can serve as a device for mental conditioning or the development of improved psychological faculties is equally applicable to the reading of pod as womb; The womb is, after all, the space in which perceptive faculties first develop. Thus the inflatable recreates both the ur-protective space and the ur-space of perception. One could call the Haus-Rucker-Co pneumatic projects "Baby-Makers" in the sense that they return the inhabitant to a baby-like state of early sensory development, encouraging the user to rely more heavily on visceral reactions to light, colors and sounds.

This notion of the womb as an incubator for the senses may have crept into the artists' consciousness from an unexpected source: Adolf Loos. With all the memorable lines in his famous *Ornament and Crime* essay, it is easy to overlook the very first sentence which recounts the important processes carried out in the intra-uterine space: "In the womb the human embryo goes through all phases of development the animal kingdom has passed through. And when a human being is born, his sense impressions are like a new-born dog's."^{xxxx} This opening line is in fact a summary of a hypothesis first proposed by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866. Loos uses this "Recapitulation Theory" to set up his argument against ornament, claiming that a propensity toward bright colors and pattern reflects a lower stage of development similar to that of a newborn child. Though the Haus-Rucker-Co's artists might affirm Loos' notion of the womb as the locus for sensory development, their decorative painted skins constitute a kind of oedipal attack on the Viennese architectural father figure. By repositioning this return to the primitive developmental state as a positive quality, a therapeutic necessity, they turn Loos's argument inside out. The simulated womb becomes a beneficial space for the recuperation and enhancement of the most basic perceptive faculties,

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thereby preparing the individual to better cope with the modern world and its rapidly expanding technological demands on the subject.

Further suggesting a relation between Loos's arguments and the inflatable devices, Haus-Rucker-Co repeatedly use the word "tattooed"^{xxxxi} to describe the painted membranes, For a group of artists educated and working in Vienna, this choice of adjective carries very specific connotations, specifically in relation to *Ornament and Crime*. In the essay, Loos uses the example of body art as one of the key linchpins in his overall argument against ornamentation. He describes the practice of tattooing as one of the most primitive forms of artistic expression, one that refined societies have long since abandoned: "The urge to decorate one's face and anything else within reach is the origin of the fine arts. It is the childish babble of painting. All art is erotic."^{xxxii} Here, the primal, childish and erotic aspects which Loos attributes to the tattoo are precisely the qualities which become operative in the Haus-Rucker-Co spatial devices. When viewed from inside the skin, the paintings establish a link to the primitive past, reawakening and strengthening the raw and powerful functions of perception. The colorful patterns, together with the material properties of the flexible membrane and the intimate scale, help Haus-Rucker-Co's decorated bubbles approximate not only an intra-uterine space, but a more comprehensive intra-uterine experience.

Full of blue stripes and "pink dots which circle before your eyes"^{xxxiii}, the artists' experiential narrative descriptions of the bubble interiors are not far removed from Salvador Dali's own highly imaginative accounts of the phenomena observed in his "pre natal" environment:

The intra-uterine paradise was . . . red, orange, yellow and bluish, the color of flames, of fire; above all it was soft, immobile, warm, symmetrical, double, gluey . . .The fact that I am still able today to reproduce at will a similar image, though much feebler, and shorn of all the grandeur and the magic of that time, by subjecting my pupils to a

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strong pressure of my fingers, makes me interpret this fulgurating image of the eggs as being a phosphene, originating in similar pressures: those of my fists closed on my orbits, which is characteristic of the fetal posture. It is a common game among all children to press their eyes in order to see circles of colors "which are sometimes called angels." The child would then be seeking to reproduce visual memories of his embryonic period, pressing his already nostalgic eyes till they hurt in order to extract from them the divine aureole of the spectral angels perceived in his lost paradise. ^{xxxiv}

In addition to sharing a certain affinity with the visual effects one might experience in one of the colorful Haus-Rucker-Co devices this passage contains very specific language similar to that used by many people to describe their experiences with mind-expanding drugs such as LSD or acid - the kind of drugs which were occasionally used by the artists and their friends in conjunction with the inflatable environments. Written accounts by Albert Hoffman, the chemist who first synthesized and experienced the effects of the drug LSD in 1943, describe abstract shapes "opening and closing themselves in circles and spirals, exploding in colored fountains." ^{xxxv}

The common theme connecting all three phenomena - Dali's imaginative pre-natal "memories", the visual effects produced by Haus-Rucker-Co's experimental machines, and Hofmann's LSD induced visions, is a perceived connection between the psychedelic patterns and a (temporary) return to primitive existence. Albert Hoffman described his first experience with LSD as leaving him "fresh as a newborn child" ^{xxxvi}, but the same expression could be used to describe the desired feeling upon climbing out of a machine like the *Gelbes Herz*. This age-reversing ambition, though seemingly compatible with Haus-Rucker-Co's other goals - protection from media, protection of love - is more problematic. For the first two goals, the actual success of the device is less important; whether or not the audience buys into the practical efficacy of the bubbles is irrelevant on a certain level, because the critical

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message about the media and its effect on social dynamics still comes through. In contrast, the interpretation of the bubbles as psychedelic wombs or attempts to create a spatial “elixir of youth” suggests a more prominent utopian dimension in the work. Understanding and appreciating the colorful patterns and their ability to tap into erotic or child like impulses requires more imagination on the part of the audience and the users. Ultimately, the painted skins hint at the unattainability of the ambitious transformative goals set for the inflatables, an unattainability which finally led to their abandonment as a trajectory of artistic and architectural exploration not only by Haus-Rucker-Co but by their entire generation.

Conclusion: Media Overcast

Over the course of the 1970's, the character of Haus-Rucker-Co's work changed significantly, most likely in response to a series of geographic relocations and changes to the group's membership. Klaus Pinter left Vienna to co-found a Haus-Rucker-Co studio in New York City with Carol Michels in 1970^{xxxvii}, while Manfred Ortner joined Laurids Ortner and Günter Zamp Kelp at the group's relocated office in Düsseldorf in 1971. Leaving the interest in smaller scale interactive devices behind, this new office focused increasingly on developing a portfolio of built work through architectural competitions. One could argue that the concept of Haus-Rucker-Co as an artists' collective (as opposed to an architectural practice) effectively came to an end when Klaus Pinter cut all ties with the group in 1977 to work independently as a painter.

Fifteen years later, the original Haus-Rucker-Co members reconvened in Vienna to oversee the design of the first major retrospective of their work. The exhibit: “Haus-Rucker-Co. Objekte, Konzepte, Bauten (Objects, Concepts, Buildings) 1967-1992” was held at the Kunsthalle Wien in 1992.^{xxxviii}

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As was the case in the 1970 "Live" exhibition, the group again attempted to transform the typically sterile gallery space, using a combination of furniture and television monitors to create a contextual environment in which to display their work. A series of nine identical two-story industrial shelving units occupied the majority of space in the hall. The stark metal assemblies complete with built-in staircases served as the vitrines for various artifacts from the group's early years of production. The artists chose not to refurbish or reanimate any of the inflatable projects, displaying them instead in their existing decrepit state, yellowed deflated skins appearing periodically amongst the other framed drawings and photographs. At the heart of the exhibition, Haus-Rucker-Co constructed a café with 10 suspended television monitors hovering over the visitors as they enjoyed their cappuccinos and apfelstrudel. Each screen broadcast a mixture of contemporary media along with video footage documenting the creation and original presentation of the projects as well as archive footage from the late sixties and early seventies.

In an ironic twist it is the television monitors, rather than the objects themselves, which best preserve and re-present the specific vitality and capacity for social engagement possessed by the original projects. Media-driven technology, the very entity which Haus-Rucker-Co sought to somehow complement or counteract with their art, serves as the locus for the work's afterlife. It is only on these monitors that visitors can see the inflatables of the *Mind Expanding Program* functioning as mental exercise equipment. This particular mode of presenting the work is both nostalgic and harshly realistic. The optimistic transformative power attributed to works of art during the late 1960s bloom of creative effervescence never produced the desired outcomes. In the words of Günter Zamp Kelp:

The means used within the . . . Mind Expanding Program were to a great extent determined by the time in which these projects were taking place. The expansion of consciousness, in the sense of the 60s, when people were experimenting with the whole realm of perception – be it visual or

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physical, with or without the use of drugs – is probably no longer necessary. Today, we are exposed to so many different images and so much information that our awareness and respectively our perception are being expanded almost automatically.^{xxxix}

The best means of mind-expansion could be found in the technological delivery devices for media all along. But first a certain multiplication and diversification had to occur. Rather than relying on a specific apparatus to challenge and improve our means of perception (whether it be television or inflatable pod), Zamp Kelp recognizes the more ephemeral and pervasive media environment which exists today. This atmosphere of media constantly increases the demands on the human mind to absorb more information and images. Like the cloud of TVs hovering in the Haus-Rucker-Co exhibition space, media today has come to constitute a kind of weather, a part of daily life, sometimes imperceptible, other times more acute.^{xi} Leaving behind the protective bubbles and utopian visions, most people have come to accept – or even embrace – these media clouds as a part of their daily lives.

ⁱ Reyner Banham, "A Home is not a House", in *Art in America*, No. 2, April 1965. Available online at <http://www.arteria.ca/ahomeisnotahouse/pages/ReynerBanham.html>.

ⁱⁱ Though technically not an inflatable, this project derives its form from Ant Farm's experiments with pneumatic architecture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ant Farm's 1971 *Media Van* project is a rare example of a TV-Bubble project in which mobility was prioritized. To meet this goal the artists modified a van to serve as the container for all the devices. In this case, the inflatable functioned more as an afterthought. It was along for the ride – more of a temporary appendage or outgrowth of the *Media Van*.

^{iv} This competition served as the catalyst for the official formation of the group. Helmut Grasberger, Manfred Ortner and Guenther Zamp Kelp entered a piece called *Pneumacosm* while Angela Hareiter, Edith Ortner and Herbert Schweiger together with Laurids Ortner and Klaus Pinter created the *Mind Expander*. Afterwards, Zamp Kelp, Laurids Ortner, and Klaus Pinter joined forces as Haus-Rucker-Co. See the timeline in Dieter Ritter, *Haus-Rucker-Co : Denkräume, Stadträume 1967-1992*, (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1992), p. 229.

^v The copy of *LIFE* magazine can be identified by the cover as the October 17th, 1969 Issue. This issue features several advertisements for color televisions.

^{vi} The central inflatable project was a piece called *Riesen Billard* (Giant Billiards). The *Gelbes Herz* (Yellow Heart) project occupies the

upper right corner, the *Grosses Puzzle* (Large Puzzle) also called *Informationstand* occupies the lower right and the demonstration of a pneumatic massage device is planned for the space in the lower left. In the upper left corner a vending machine offers refreshments. See also Bogner's timeline entry for 1971. The timeline begins on p. 229.

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 229

^{viii} My translation. The original appears in German in Günther Feuerstein, *Visionäre Architektur : Wien 1958 - 1988* (Berlin: Ernst, 1988), p. 90-92.

^{ix} "Guenter Zamp Kelp in Conversation with Torsten Schmiedeknecht", in *Architectural Design*, 1998, Sep-Oct, v. 68, n.9-10, p. 45.

^x My translation. The original text appears in German in Bogner, p. 9.

^{xi} In this respect, Haus-Rucker-Co's inflatables stand in direct opposition to projects such as the *Environment Bubble*, *Intensiv-Box*, and the *Cushicle* which seek to establish a more direct link between human and screen.

^{xii} The colorful markings distinguish Haus-Rucker-Co's inflatables from the purely transparent skins produced by their contemporaries. The patterns can also be used to identify a very specific phase of work for the Haus-Rucker-Co. When ecological concerns started to play a greater role (beginning sometime in 1971) the markings disappear from the skin of the inflatables.

^{xiii} The manufacturing process for the type of printed circuit boards used today was developed for the first time in the mid 1930s by the Viennese inventor Paul Eisler.

^{xiv} Torsten Schmiedeknecht, "The Ephemeral in the Work of Haus-Rucker-Co", in *Architectural Design*, 1998, Sep-Oct, v. 68, n.9-10, p. 38.

^{xv} Feuerstein, p. 100.

^{xvi} The name is a word play on the Hausruck region of Austria where Günther Zamp Kelp and Klaus Pinter were born. It also implies the architectural idea of clearing the old houses away to make room for the new ones. See the timeline entry for 1967 in Bogner, p. 229.

^{xvii} Bogner, 17.

^{xviii} My translation. Original text in German. See Bogner, p. 13.

^{xix} Georges Teyssot, "Architecture de prothese pour un corps post-humain = Extensions of the post-human body" in *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 2004 Mar/Apr, n. 351, p. 52.

^{xx} "Guenter Zamp Kelp in Conversation with Torsten Schmiedeknecht" *Architectural design*, 1998, Sep-Oct, v. 68, n.9-10, p. 46.

^{xxi} See Bogner's timeline entry for 1967, p. 229.

^{xxii} Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 219.

^{xxiii} My translation. Original text in German. See Bogner, p. 17.

^{xxiv} *LIFE* Magazine, poll conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, published in the article "But do we like what we watch" in *LIFE*, Sep 10, 1971 p. 43.

^{xxv} Tristan Tzara, "Concerning a Certain Automatism of Taste" (1936) in *The Surrealists Look at Art: Eluard, Aragon, Soupault, Breton, Tzara / [introduction] by Pontus Hulten*, (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990), 201-213.

^{xxvi} *Friederich Kiesler : endless house*, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), p. 80.

^{xxvii} See the timeline entry for 1964 in Bogner, p. 229.

^{xxviii} See Antje von Graevenitz's exhibition review "Oneindigheid en reductie: Frederick Kieslers 'Endless House' = Endlessness and reduction: Frederick Kiesler's 'Endless House'" in *Archis* 1996 Nov., n.11, p.63-69.

^{xxix} Torsten Schmiedeknecht, "The Ephemeral in the Work of Haus-Rucker-Co", *Architectural design*, 1998, Sep-Oct, v. 68, n.9-10, p. 38.

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^{xxx} Adolf Loos, *Ornament and crime*, Michael Mitchell, trans. (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, c1998), p. 1.

^{xxxi} See for example note xxii.

^{xxxii} Loos, p. 3.

^{xxxiii} Bogner, 13.

^{xxxiv} Salvador Dali, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali* originally published by Dial Press, New York in 1942, Chapter Two "Intra-Uterine Memories" (New York: Dover, 1993), p. 27.

^{xxxv} "Albert Hofmann, Obituary" in *The Economist*, May 8, 2008, p. 98.

^{xxxvi} Ibid, p. 98.

^{xxxvii} See the Bogner timeline entries for 1970 and 1971, p. 229. Carol Michels was at one time married to Doug Michels, one of the founding members of Ant Farm.

^{xxxviii} Bogner, 7.

^{xxxix} "Guenter Zamp Kelp in Conversation with Torsten Schmiedeknecht" *Architectural Design*, 1998, Sep-Oct, v. 68, n.9-10, p. 43.

^{xl} Hence the widespread use of the expression "media storm".