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# AIR

The exhibition is divided into four sections, each interpreting the closeness of the various works on display to the four natural elements (air, earth, fire, and water) in association with the four different states of aggregation of matter (gaseous, solid, plasmatic and liquid). In addition to the works more directly related to the element dimension, there are works by some major artists from the first half of the twentieth century who were influenced by alchemical beliefs, particularly in the field of Surrealism.

The gaseous state, to which the first three rooms are dedicated, is commonly perceived as the most immaterial of the states of matter due to its intangibility. It is actually a material state like the others, in which the particles – atoms or molecules – are more distant from each other, interact very little with each other and are in continuous and disorderly movement.

In common usage, the term “gas” indicates the state of aeriform matter: this is because the most immediate example of gas is air, a mixture of gases and vapors essential for the survival of most animal and plant organisms.

1. Bruno Jacob, *Unusual Things Happen (It's all There)*, 2012

Even the most seemingly immaterial elements, such as air, can become active material components in the creation of the artwork. In the case of the work of Bruno Jacob (Jegenstorf, 1954), they can even be brain impulses, steam, seasons or anxieties, as the caption of this work states. What manifests itself to our eyes is a canvas hidden in a tube and an entirely white painting, on which invisible energies intervene, accumulating and radiating. A process that recalls the birth of photography, when celluloid film revealed fleeting and blurred shadows, almost as if it were a magical material in dialogue with the atmosphere.

2. Hans Haacke, *Large Condensation Cube*, 1963–1967

In this fundamental work of his historical production, Hans Haacke (Köln, 1936) relates the minimalist form of the cube – alluding to the exhibition space (the so-called “White Cube”) – to environmental cycles, exploiting the “dew point,” i.e. the moment in which the air, charged with water vapor, is no longer able to contain the humidity present in the environment, discharging it onto the surfaces with which it comes into contact. The presence of visitors is part of this process, as their bodies also contribute to the variation of the room temperature, altering the environmental conditions. An exponent of *Institutional Critique*, Haacke here alludes to the never-neutral relationship of the work of art to the context in which it is located, in particular to the dimension of the museum, with all its material, cultural, and social significance.

3. Giorgio de Chirico, *Calco dall'antico con guanto di gomma*, 1959.  
Artist's replica of the painting Canto d'amore (1914).

That Giorgio de Chirico (Volos, 1888 – Rome, 1978), founder of Metaphysics, was deeply immersed in alchemical culture is affirmed by numerous scholars and witnesses. In this artist's replica of a famous painting from 1914 (*Canto d'Amore*), the rubber glove hanging from the nail, placed beside the classical head of Apollo del Belvedere, cites an illustration of Giovanni Panteo's treatise depicting the alchemist's laboratory, while at the bottom the sphere refers to Durer's famous engraving of *Melancholia I*: the alchemical illustration par *excellence*.

4. Leandro Erlich, *The Cloud (UK)*, 2016

In an illuminated case, what seems to be an ethereal and gaseous cloud is suspended, but on closer inspection, it turns out to be an object made up of drawings on transparent overlapping sheets. Toying with perceptive deception, undermining our certainties, Leandro Erlich (Buenos Aires, 1973) reminds us that everything is matter, even the impalpable clouds, while the title hints at the impulse to associate images with the clouds that flow in the sky. The ambiguous nature of the work suggests why the artist likes to define himself as “an architect of the uncertain,” and how much inspiration he has drawn from imaginative literature, from his compatriot Borges above all, and from the visionary cinema of Buñuel, Lynch, and Hitchcock.

5. Victor Brauner, *Étude pour “La Naissance de la matière”*, 1940

The exhibition opens in ideal terms with a drawing by Victor Brauner (Piatra Neam, 1903 – Paris, 1966), one of the principal exponents of the esoteric phase of Surrealism, marked by a profound interest in the principles of alchemy. The self-proclaimed “President of the Great Metamorphosis,” in this work Brauner reworks an eighteenth-century miniature found on the title page of Grillo De Givry's famous volume *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy* (1929), from which the Surrealists drew heavily. The work features the *rebis*: the androgynous being born from the union between the male and female principles. The wolf's head alludes to the Earth, the breath that comes out of its jaws is air, the swollen ground – a metaphor for the volcano – indicates fire, while water is visible at the feet of the male element. The “birth of matter” is embodied in the serpent-ouroboros, symbolizing the cyclical nature of the transformative process.

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1. Tony Conrad, *Yellow TV*, 1973

A mathematics graduate, programmer, musician, and media expert, Tony Conrad (Concord, 1940 – Cheektowaga, 2016) created a series of works on canvas of which *Yellow TV* is a part. In a frame shaped to resemble an old monitor, the artist spreads a layer of industrial yellow paint, exposing the pigment to light sources. The surface is thus subject to an inevitable process of transformation and decomposition, which gives visual form to the passage of time, and to the perennial interaction between objects and atmospheric elements.

2. Yves Klein, *Cosmogonie sans titre*, COS 8, 1960

For Yves Klein (Nice, 1928 – Paris, 1962), one of the greatest artists of the post-WWII period, the four natural elements are a continuous source of inspiration, which is why one of his works is present in each of the four sections of the exhibition. In particular, the element of air is evoked in this *Cosmogonie*, produced by placing a white canvas covered in fresh paint onto the roof of a car traveling from Paris to Nice. The artist's intention was to capture the idea of wind on the canvas, thereby evoking the continuous and uncontrolled transformations of matter and of the cosmos in the presence of natural agents.

3. David Medalla, *Cloud Canyons (Bubble Machines Auto-Creative Sculptures) No. 31*, 1964–2016

David Medalla (Manila, 1942–2020)'s works emerge from the desire to experiment in sculpture with materials capable of evoking the dimension of the cell, the smallest biological structure capable of multiplying through reactions and processes of a chemical nature. In this historic work, recently reconstructed, in contact with water and soap, air creates structures that appear solid but that are actually flexible and in continuous movement. Oxygen is the engine behind the transformation of matter, the agent that gives life to ever-new forms.

4. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Greifbar 43*, 2015

In this work by Wolfgang Tillmans (Remscheid, 1968), photographic paper is used in an experimental manner, subjecting it to a long stay in the darkroom, where it is slowly exposed to air and light. The resulting image makes one think of the sun, of a body seen from the inside, of an abstract painting or perhaps of X-rays. The title of the work also refers to this purely material dimension, meaning “tangible,” for although it questions our conventional idea of photography as the representation of an image, it highlights the occurrence of real phenomena, underlining the materiality of the photographic process and its chemical components.

5. Alessandro Biggio, *Senza titolo (schiume)*, 2021

According to Alessandro Biggio (Cagliari, 1974), matter is a complex and fascinating system of correspondences waiting to be brought to the surface. Known for his sculptures made of ash obtained from the burning of oily plants from his garden, with this new series of works the artist set out to explore the blurred boundary between organic and inert matter through the use of polyurethane foam: a chemical compound capable of solidifying in contact with carbon dioxide. Sprayed in large tubs of water, therefore subject to the sensitive currents caused by the wind, the material takes on unpredictable forms, with results that are almost completely beyond the control of the artist, yet reminiscent of the natural world.

6. Leonora Carrington, *Oink (They shall behold the eyes)*, 1959

This work, created by Leonora Carrington (Chorley, 1917 – Ciudad de México, 2011) after moving to Mexico, is representative of the artist's many interests, ranging from Greek mythology to Celtic traditions, to the macabre themes of Mexican tradition, all enclosed in a complex symbolic framework, imbued in the alchemical culture the artist fed on, being in close contact with the exponents of Surrealism, via her companion Max Ernst. In the painting, we find the bull, which evokes the myth of the labyrinth, the Cretan divinity in the background, the chimera with the head of a hyena, the Celtic figures with pointed hair, the dove and the cross of the Christian tradition together with the white snake, symbol of the alchemical process. The alembic, the salamander, and the white shade represent the three phases of the alchemical process: the Black Phase, the White Phase and the Red Phase.

7. Paolo Icaro, *Soffio*, 1986

Air can be used as an instrument for modeling matter, and we can clearly observe this phenomenon in *Soffio*: a work created by Paolo Icaro (Turin, 1936) during his stay in Connecticut. Here, a stable and light material such as plaster is modified during its passage from the liquid to the solid state, through a “breath” which affects the surface, modifying it. The memory of the breath of life, which becomes creative power even in its extreme delicacy, is retained by the material, once the process of solidification stabilizes. Ever since the 1980s, Icaro has created one *Soffio* per year to emphasize the elasticity of another dimension: that of time.

8. Cyprien Gaillard, *Real Remnants of Fictive Wars IV*, 2004

As the title suggests, the real remains of a fictitious war are evoked in this silent film – the fourth in a major series created by Cyprien Gaillard (Paris, 1980) in the early years of his work. What war is referred to is not known. What instead seems to emerge clearly is the contrast between the beauty of the landscape, the romantic imagery of the cloud in motion – obtained using a simple fire extinguisher – and the specter of the toxic cloud, alluding to an irresponsible use of chemistry, capable of affecting human life and unsettling natural equilibria

Corridor. Lars Fredrikson, *Trio pour retombée radioactive*, 1978

A pioneer in the relationship between visual arts and sound experimentation, at the end of the 1970s, Lars Friedrikson (Stockholm, 1926 – Vevouil, 1997) created this composition in which a Geiger counter – an instrument used to measure ionizing radiation – interacts with the voice and breath of the poet Jean Daive. The result is low frequencies that our body is able to resonate within itself, accompanied by multiple sounds. Sound thus manifests itself as a material element, in continuous mutation, capable of permeating space and occupying our body.